

# Alternate Routes

A Journal of Critical Social Research

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**Talk Of Inventing Tradition: Sketching  
Limitations Of Anthropological Concepts of  
Culture**

**Being Eritrean in Milan**

**Biotechnology and the Society-nature  
Relation**

**The Changing Configurations of Inequality in  
Post-industrial Society:  
Volunteering as a Case Study**

**The Possibility of Pleasure: Foucault's  
Philosophy of the Subject and the Logic of an  
Appeal to Aesthetics**

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## **Editorial Policy/Call For Papers**

*Alternate Routes (AR)* is a refereed multi-disciplinary journal published annually by graduate students in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University Ottawa, Canada, K1S 5B6, altroutes@lists.carleton.ca. As a peer reviewed journal, *AR* provides a forum for debate and exchange among North American and International graduate students. We are interested in receiving papers written by graduate students (or coauthored with faculty), regardless of university affiliation.

The editorial emphasis of the journal is on the publication of critical and provocative analyses of theoretical and substantive issues. We welcome papers on a broad range of topics and encourage submissions which advance or challenge theoretical questions and contemporary issues. We also welcome commentaries and reviews of recent publications, works in progress and personal perspectives.

*Alternate Routes* is currently seeking submissions for Volume 20, 2004. Papers should be submitted double-spaced and in triplicate, following the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing system, keeping endnotes to a minimum. Please see our website for a style-guide.

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## Perspective

# Talk of Inventing Tradition: Sketching Limitations of Anthropological Concepts of Culture

Brian P. Miller

University of Manchester

### *Introduction: On a Cultural Approach*

As an adolescent, 'culture' was always something to possess. Together, my family could walk out the door, hop in the Pontiac or Buick, and drive off to experience culture. We could visit the cultural center - the museum, the theatre, the cinema, the art gallery; we could tour a cultural site - a historic mansion, a battlefield, a realistically reconstructed colonial, or native settlement; we could even attend a cultural event - the St. Patrick's Day, or July Fourth Parade, the Greek or German festival. My family could venture anywhere but home to find culture. It was out in society and absent in the neighborhood. The artist's object, the symphony performance, even the refined dinner experience was a means to ascertain the culture just downtown a few minutes drive. Culture found its way into my life through the relocation of my body to designated areas where culture was contained, erected, even illustrated, for my gaze and absorption, rearranging my perceptions and awareness, and readying me for a specific kind of experience.

Naïve at best, simple at least, culture was materialistic and experienced in certain interactions with others. Holy describes these elements of "high culture" as ways in which shared meanings help to make sense of a world that constantly changes<sup>1</sup>. Never did it occur to me that culture might be an omnipresent force, a fluid, ebbing movement of perceptions and definitions, a point of contention, even argument... politically, a tool for negotiation, a system of reinvention or a shifting, limited concept of differentiation... a context for understanding. Numerous travels, global encounters, and, not the least, several years of academic anthropology have razed these adolescent definitions, or maybe just reconstructed

them. This paper focuses on the various dimensions and contentions the concept of *culture* brings to anthropology.

The term is a functional and constructive idiom of language, not limited to academic departments in the social sciences of the Western Hemisphere. People give culture meaning through how they use and refer to it. Ambiguity surrounds the margins of the culture concept and anthropology debates these notions as a matter of practice. As an element of the human being's social atmosphere, culture now lacks clarity even within the discipline of anthropology, having undergone a critical rethinking in the last twenty-five years. In attempting to reconcile the notion of culture and its multitude of meanings, its outline is less clear. The effervescence of the presence and significance of *culture* in the academy does not negate but diminishes embarrassment for my former notions when popular discourse still clings to similar, material definitions as those I once used. Understanding culture as a mode of interpretation and representation depends on context, conversation, and the audience of these two elements. It is not beyond an individual to watch a film where men perform "the monkey chant" in a jungle in Southeast Asia and gain insight into another culture, see that as something distinct from their own. The frontiers of understanding create boundaries for the knowing of the idea itself, though not rigid. The word *culture* is supposed to have perimeters; it functions with difference in mind.

### *Limiting Anthropology*

Perhaps the suggestion that the identity of culture lie in the material aspects of my hometown was not entirely naïve; rather, the context of using the term culture to construct this meaning limited other possibilities. The materialist definition was a valid description. In *Culture in Practice*, Marshall Sahlins illustrates, with slight disdain for this value, "for too many, 'culture' still has this predominantly aesthetic or intellectual signification (2000:16)." His obvious point states that culture is more than the epitomized material expressions of society - more than the museums and intellectualized, institutionalized, elitist version. It comes from anthropological frameworks and not the day-to-day, popular, lived conception that he acknowledges. Even in contemporary discussions of culture, especially regarding authentic and invented traditions, the characteristics of a web of meanings are made obvious, illustrative, and interesting through reference to site-specific rituals,

craft, language, and other, outwardly visible aesthetic products; expressive *culture* helps to differentiate. It is easy to glean from Sahlins' words here that anthropology has its own model and use for *culture* that it tends to continually try to renegotiate. Yet anthropology, and in particular its hallmark methodology of ethnography, has played a part in Western intellectualism by reinforcing modernist ideas about what gets identified as a cultural item.

What is worth consideration are the limitations of the anthropological treatment of the culture concept. The definitions and uses anthropology gives to the idea fluctuate too much, hovering just above comprehension, offering the inadequate guarantee of a definitive way to talk about the essence of culture. Employing the idea of culture as a way to delineate differences between groups of people does not allow room in an academic discourse for those groups to alter their own identity. A discursive fence prevents them from getting on with the process of sustaining and formulating meaning in their lives, bartering knowledge of the world with those who they see as lying beyond an imagined boundary.

The very tension of continually calling to question and the redrawing of lines has been the subject of poignant investigations seen recently in the works of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) and *Recapturing Anthropology* (Fox, 1991), as well as postmodernist, and afterological<sup>2</sup> thought. Though distinct approaches, their questions are real and warranted. Anthropologists have exerted - in fact, an entire discipline and discourse found - over the central idea that culture (or something dubbed as culture) is alive between, among, and through people. What is being asked is whether culture does have substance and how it is and can be defined and by whom? Is culture, as an empirical model, valuable? Is the "very emphasis on 'culture'... a betrayal" and misnomer for the complexities of human communication and behavior (Ingold, 1996:119)? Anthropology, from its conception and as a vehicle for study and debate, is so wrapped up in the project of modernity, that its constant self-critique, internal uncertainty, moral consciousness, and historical change, embody the modernist spirit of progress: takedown the old, build the new, rejoice, remit, renew. Nevertheless, these conventions are dependent on the morality of each era and anthropology is constantly at arms with itself in the face of changing concerns and timely issues. Negotiations of culture not only appear to occur in the global world of struggling, sentient, social forces but are also a mechanism of

the intellectual direction of the anthropological approach to understanding: to create a perception of meaning within human worlds.

Returning to Marshal Sahlins', I had a chuckle reading "Two Or Three Things I Know About Culture" when he wrote:

It is possible to conclude from several decades of disciplinary self-reflection that anthropology doesn't exist, since if it isn't sociology, it's humanities. Alternatively, it is reassuring to know that anthropologists are able to share with the peoples they study the ability to construct ethnic differences by developing epitomizing contrasts of selected cultural values (Sahlins, 1999:400).

I wish to make clear that this was an eighteen page, "anthropological" paper in an "anthropological" journal. Anthropology does exist, just not as he had construed. Sahlins' demonstration of displacement summarizes the condition anthropology realizes itself in today - questioning its past, reassessing and evaluating its impressions and descriptions. The human being, as a mode of representation, no longer holds authority in the realm of science. Even anthropology has begun questioning the validity of scientific truth, its offerings to the human world, and its relationship to upholding the foundations of a problematic, colossal hegemony. A new anthropologists' creed might be offered, "I am not an instrument of objective measurement." Leaving the domain and genre of enlightened, empirical inquiry, Sahlins evokes a movement towards a discipline grounded in moral ingenuity. The inability to poise and sidle itself firmly in an academic category, wavering in empirical sensibility, reflects silent incongruities as well as resonating modernist elements of disconnection. Anthropology's self-prescribed role as purveyor of truth in Western society has changed: its legitimacy, debunked. Linked admittedly and forthrightly to a colonial project of domination since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists have run headfirst into a quagmire of morality and self-awareness, stimulating concerns of its effectiveness. In an idealistic, Western democratic sense of freedom and humanity - meaning, making way for the right of all humans to make their own decisions and choices, to live without oppression and violence from others - anthropology has become highly critical and sensitive to its role in politics and as an author of knowledge.

Conceivably, a residual guilt coats a professional conscience focused, in the last twenty or more years, on post colonialist (or late-imperialist, or high-imperialist) underpinnings. As a focus of debate, anthropology's own internal strife has muddled its definitions and reality of culture. Maybe this social and scholastic climate of over sensitivity to the contemporary world condition of globalization, the capitalist world market, hyper-cautious political positioning, and the introduction of *Western* philosophical ideals into every niche of human communities around the globe have deconstructed an anthropological understanding of itself and simultaneously dug a moat, an unapproachable bastion, with anthropology in the center. Its own constructed tradition has marginalized its self-worth, making it difficult to approach and to venture out into new understanding. In a gesture to support Marshal Sahlins, for I find agreement in much of his writing, he does correspond to the idea of ideological and practical toil. "Modern anthropology still struggles with what had seemed like Enlightenment to the philosophers of the eighteenth century but turned out to be a parochial self-consciousness of European expansion and the *mission civilisatrice*" (Sahlins, 2000:501). Civilization simply referred to the society in which the philosophers of that time lived; civilization was a concept and model, hierarchical to barbarism, a stage beyond savage primitivism to which, paraphrasing Kant, Sahlins (2000) writes, progress and reason would overcome.

Returning, however, to another point about Marshall Sahlins' statement from "Two or Three Things," his comments allows, for no apparent reason, for anthropology to shake hands with itself for having the ability to make similar distinctions based on research in some locale that categorizes others through quintessential characteristics of difference. But at this stage in departure, making distinctions about the "world out there" and "other" people seems a universal characteristic of the human experience. The brain of an individual inherently creates differences of self and not-self and this procedure is played out on a grand scale in the social world of humans. This faculty does not confer, outside of situated knowledge, a truth about where lines ought to be drawn, or who is to decide what prevails as a boundary. The discipline of anthropology is consciously entwined with political manoeuvres and negotiations, but why should anthropology be a better judge or negotiator of culture? One answer is that in a Western society, it is the institutional intellectuals

who produce identities for its constituents. This "position" that, in general:

. . . The anthropologist's intervention will be meaningful in terms of [resolving culture conflict and dynamics of domination]" or that s/he "can judge what is beneficial or 'environmentally sound' and what is not," based on familiarity with the location and knowledge of cultural values, is taken for granted (Escobar, 1995:669).

This perspective seems positioned in a Western notion of power (though, also, a particular kind of negotiation). "Anthropologists need to be aware of the different ways - and the different social and political contexts - in which anthropological ideas and concepts are used by non-anthropologists" (Ahmed and Shore, 1995:31). As I was saying, the Guggenheim is as much a cultural characteristic as the theory of commodity culture. It represents specific aspects of, in this case, art, architecture, and aesthetics of the twentieth century. The commodity, culture, is traded between forces. Culture then, implied from Sahlins' nod, is essentially the process of a group of people agreeing on shared similarities while creating differentiation from another group who is involved in an analogous practice. Yet it also encompasses the manifested, even physical, symbols of which these groups identify with. Both institute differences, enduring or not.

*"Take I: Make of it what you will"*

Eric Wolf (1994) asserts, en route towards considering the nature of culture as a global positioning device:

Culture...has a societal background, and that background has implications for how we conceptualize and use [it]. I think of ideas as 'takes' on the phenomena of this world and as instructions about how to combine these takes to ascertain their connections or, contrariwise, to hold them as apart, to beware of asserting linkages as false. I also think that particular takes are prompted by background conditions and limited by these conditions (1994:2).

It is important to point out that Wolf's paper talks about *what* the concept, culture, allows us to think and *how* it allows us to think. Without trying to be redundant, or simple, realizing that culture takes on different meanings within different social contexts is a critical link to understanding the limitations that talking about culture runs into. It is an illusion to see the term as possessing universality. Many "takes" differ from the obstinacy of anthropological "takes."

Anthropology has developed its own history of the world, including the writing of the history of the present. This conceit, somewhat radically, imposed itself on the Western world with its refined order of facts and findings. Lingering within this paradigm, discursive anthropology in the twenty-first century tends to ignore its own placement in the fashioned epoch and its constructed, ideological networks that are themselves "passing through a phase in global history." (Ahmed and Shore, 1995:32). Grimshaw and Hart decide that "established forms [of modern anthropology], both concepts and practices, no longer seem adequate for engaging with the shifting complexity of contemporary society (Grimshaw and Hart, 1995:60)." When the paradigmatic grounds for the relationship between inquiry and understanding have been excavated, anthropology cannot continue producing the kind of knowledge to which it is accustomed. Its correlation to Enlightened, modern motifs and motives prohibit talking about human communities without implying progressive social models and cultural distancing through a silent, hierarchical self-image. Moreover, anthropology's inherent reticence questions its own values. It is the modern lament, evident in Sahlin's statement about anthropology's "parochial self-consciousness." In a perceptual world of categorized knowledge and institutionalized intellectualism, the broadening, fantastic world of Western European imperialism around the globe, principally, its encounters with "new" peoples, lead the way for the emergence of an understanding of these experiences through a logical system of symbols by which to order their lives. Anthropology introduced new meanings to new experiences through the fabric of science, a means familiar to its own, native social production of knowledge.

When anthropologists begin asking themselves, "who belongs to culture, and to whom does a 'culture' belong? Who can-and ought to - study and preserve it" (Jackson, 1995:17), they realize the schism, often overlooked in anthropological research. Jackson suggests that culture is

“something dynamic, something that people use to adapt to changing social conditions - and as something that is adapted in turn - [here] we have a more serviceable sense of how culture operates over time, particularly in situations demanding rapid change (Jackson, 1995:18).

In this definition, reliant on the context of communities of people struggling for identity and differentiation from each other, culture rests at the margins of daily, social existence where negotiations of a political nature are more alive than the perpetuation of a status quo (unless, of course, the struggle is the status quo). Jackson gives the impression that culture is a collective will and momentum. Here, there is a type of cultural understanding that is relevant to the use of the term in a socially expressive context: people outwardly contesting their identity. However, in the status quo a certain mechanics of perpetuating and living out differences is a daily activity. *Culture* becomes functional, malleable, and manipulative. This may only be true in part because when culture is debated in this manner what is occurring is an expressiveness of particular circumstances. Cultural systems become more apparent when conceived of in relation to another, when they disclose “their properties by the way they respond to diverse circumstances, organizing those circumstances in specific forms and, in the event, changing their forms in specific ways (Sahlins, 2000:499).” What is being alluded to is the utilization of existing cultural characteristics, mostly epitomized, to reconstruct identity in the face of changing social contexts and conditions: inventing culture.

Okay, so I brought it out in the open. The very mention of the idea that culture is “contrived” gets eyes rolling and deep sighs among anthropologists. What makes culture authentic? What does it mean to invent a culture? In addition, what tradition is not? Globalization, through the imposition of a world economic system, has made these questions highly volatile. Anthropologists have been discussing them for nearly half a century in various forms. *Culture* has taken on new meanings as people wrestle with ways to retain identity and value in the context of rapid social bombardment and change. Nevertheless, can we say this is a modern phenomenon?

Recently, these issues and the writing on them have had to do with the after effects of colonial encounters and the ways in which *other* cultures (other than the ones the anthropologists represented) adapted, or incorporated, or handled the new experiences introduced by the “West.”

These societies, often perceived of as in need of civilization, proceeded to redefine themselves under the newly revamped conditions of their lives. Marshall Sahlins remarks about existing academic interpretations of the traditional culture myth that it is itself situated:

Too many anthropologists say that the so-called traditions the people are flaunting are not much more than serviceable humbuggery. They are 'invented traditions', fabricated with an eye politic to the present situation. Signs of a supposed indigeneity and antiquity, the stories actually owe their substance as well as their existence to the Western capitalist cultures they would thus defy (1999:402).

As much as they would like to concede, the culture to which the anthropologists are linked have fashioned their own traditions in direct relation to these pretentious beliefs, and thus distinctiveness, through their own form of "serviceable humbuggery." Saying that there is such a thing as an invented tradition is itself an invented tradition. It is a method of differentiation. Anthropology and Western society owe as much to the *primitive* world for giving them a sense of identity as the natives do to Europeans for teaching them about their own noble savagism.

The academy claimed legitimacy in declaring and measuring authenticity in the name of scientific evidence, in the name of its encounter and influence on the people. Europeans never dreamt that the native had had an impact on their way of thinking. "Western social science consistently repositions itself as the originary point of comparative and generalizing theory" (Moore, 1996:3). Talk of inventing a tradition.<sup>3</sup> Inventiveness on the part of the "native" was rationalized by declaring that the absorption of Europeanisms, be it goods, or religion, or the reconfiguration of local customs, was indication of inauthentic culture. This perspective harks back to a predominant, underlying premise of modern progressive thought that alleged what was not Western was not civilized and thus timeless, inert, and in need of transformation. Simple dictionary definitions clarifying the term, invent, state that to do so is "to devise by thinking; to produce for the first time through the use of the imagination or of ingenious thinking and experiment" (Merriam-Webster Online). Learning to adapt and respond is not only a characteristic of the individual but

of a body of individuals, living together through similar perceptions. Inventiveness is a built-in instrument for cultural liveliness.

*Ding An Sich (the thing itself)*

Anthropologists in the contemporary scene investigate similar ideas about social ingenuity on the global stage. As the global village develops and various cultures concede to a world economic market, anthropologists have been addressing the notion of homogeneity *et al.* global hegemony. This is the assertion that there subsists a common structure and vocabulary, or knowledge that all peoples (cultures) will understand and make meaningful their participation in this macro-network. This seems somewhat bleak. The argument against such plans demonstrates a connective, working, symbiotic relationship between the local and the global where invention is necessary because the source and motivation for cultural distinctiveness is cradled in shared diversity. Communities are using symbolic characteristics to formulate their identity, to specify what is particular about *their* culture. A central property of capitalist democracy is the flourishing of variety and endless image making. The twentieth century has seen this process repeatedly with flourishing nationalist movements across the globe. Essentially, what is most valuable within a common social perception is being heralded as quintessential to that order creating subtle differences between communities. The concept of *culture* is a positional tool.

Here, the association with one or another cultures is significant in that cohesiveness is formed in a way particular to the human capacity for order. I think an important factor in considering any discussion of the use of culture is, as stated earlier, how *culture* provides us with the ability to have meaningful lives. Tim Ingold, in his 1996 edited volume, *Key Debates in Anthropology*, documents a deliberation on just that topic. I will not reiterate what the debate, "Human worlds are culturally constructed," says and decides, but I would like to state that the debate centered on the human being's facility to experience and perceive the *world out there*. Reflection of the social and cultural as a natural, instinctive, inherent (call it what you like) ability of the human species is often glossed over in understanding social and cultural order and definitions. Our ability to apply meaning to an objectified experience of the world too often elevates these systems to practices beyond what we deem as *natural*. A *constructed world* is solely within the human realm

of perception. It is how we think of our engagement with what we call an environment. When Roland Littlewood explains that to believe that culture is not a constructed event “is to suggest that we can really experience the world out there *as it is*,” he offers only part of the equation (1996: 122). He attends that we are the creators of the blocks with which we assemble our perceptual and real worlds, and “we determine our experience of it, our human world (122).” He is implying that culture is the only way we come to understand the world. His implications, though, lack an actual material reality. The part he has right is that human experience allows us to create (or think we create) meanings, such as what is cultural, to live out and to receive back from through interaction. The event is not so much a construction as it is a simultaneous creation and exhibition of the encounter with a projected significance of the world out there, as it is. “Truth is the confirmation of Appearance to Reality (Whitehead, 1933: 241).”

In this sense, people live out their lives in the world with an “irreducibly cultural character” because this experience of culture shapes the capacity to understand (James, 1996: 105). I do not see the dichotomy, or reciprocity, that Tim Ingold derives of the difference between living in a culturally constructed world and in a world where we humans are simply engaged. I see the lived experience as a unity of both, a dependence on both because people are able to disengage from their perceived worlds, and through the process of perception, the perceiver (the product) unites with this world through the capacity to formulate significance within it. Perception, then, is more than a mode of engagement; it creates meaning that conceives an image of the world for the perceiver. Perception is the world out there and within. In the end, what both sides of the debate were arguing for is the magnitude that culture, not as a word but as an idea, has on the contexts of human life, both as a perception and as an interpreter of perception. Culture is a means of engagement and reflection with ourselves in the world.

### *Conclusion: Res Cogitans; Res Extensa*

Each endeavor to understand humankind works with a set of characteristic ideas that orient its inquiries and justify its

existence, and for anthropology ideas about...culture...have played that guiding and legitimizing role (Wolf, 1994:1).

I have not endeavored to dilute the potency of the culture concept; I wanted to highlight that there are limitations on anthropological capacities for understandings of it. My reminiscence of childhood perceptions is what got the wheels rolling on how culture is not just anthropology's contribution. The concept was not only physically manifest in my geography but it was the "expressive and customary means by which [my social constructs were] maintained" (Sahlins, 2000:15). In Western society (and plausibly others), despite resistance to this reality, culture still relates to these customary artifacts similar to those found in the societies that anthropologist study. "Cultures are not static," Jackson purports, they appropriate the possibility *culture* affords, and are not "homogeneous systems on which change is imposed. Rather, cultures are systems whose very foundations are characterized by dynamism, negotiation, and contestation" (Jackson, 1995:20).

The networked brain of anthropology has propagated perceptions that are familiar to it. Culture concepts are strong and embedded in discourse and meaning. Theory and discipline fill the synapses, allowing a re-experiencing of the *anthropological*, as if there is an embodied response to approaching the world through its practice. Postmodernists would clap their hands at me for saying anthropology seems to be in a state of fragmentation. However, I am suggesting that anthropology is on a threshold, only frozen there, confused and too self-conscious to begin a new approach to a world that has out grown its vision. Appadurai offers his views on new understanding and approaches in referring to a "global ethnoscape" (1991). In the new design, anthropologists must admit the "dilemmas of perspective and representation" and the effects this plays on representation while also focusing on the historical problems of the twenty-first century (1991:191). He concludes, saying, "...it seems advisable to treat the present historical moment and use our understanding of it to illuminate and guide the formulation of historical problems (1991:208)." Appadurai is calling for a type of objectivity that aims at the depiction of critical and moral issues among ever increasing, transnational identities. The subject of culture needs addressing, when and

where people are confronting differences on their own terms and not those envisioned by the anthropologist.

Anthropology is about representing notions of the time, specifically, with clear contexts and boundaries in mind. Anthropology of “ethnoscapes” reflects this thought. This is the culture it comes out of and *culture* is the context that creates meaning. It represents the objectives, morality, and politics of its time. Still, culture is not an exclusive circumstance to anthropology, not anymore. Anthropology as a disciplined way of creating meaning in the world needs to rediscover value in its process while realizing that culture, in its various contexts, is itself about assigning values. “Anthropology has been predicated on maintaining clear boundaries between self and other,” (Escobar, 1992:381) and for myself, these boundaries are what make anthropology a worthwhile exploration; they make anthropology a significant device to negotiate and discover shared understandings. What coexists with this significance is setting out “to question the productivity of the culture concept” in every situation (Escobar, 1992:381). Difference exists; culture is one way it can and “essentialized descriptions are not the platonic fantasies of anthropologists alone; they are general cultural conditions of human perception and communication” (Sahlins, 2000:499). The traditions of anthropology are in the throes of new experience. The devices by which people and anthropologists gauge the acceptability of change are no longer capable of explaining and ordering the perceived world out there.<sup>4</sup> It may be optimistic, but it is time to move ahead and invent some new traditions.

*“SO PRETTY SOON EVERYONE WILL HAVE A CULTURE;  
ONLY THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS WILL DOUBT IT”<sup>5</sup>*

### *Notes*

1.Ladislav Holy, (1996: 12.)

2.Sahlins refers to Brightman (1995): ‘afterology.’ “Two or Three Things I Know about Culture.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (3): 399-421.

3.Marshall Sahlins (1999). “Two or Three Things I Know About Culture.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (3): 399-421.

- 4.Regarding Sahlins' remark referencing Lamont Lindstrom (1982:316-29) in *Culture in Practice* (2000). New York: Zone Books.
- 5.Marshall Sahlins (1999). "Two or Three Things I Know About Culture." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (3): 399-421.

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## **Work In Progress**

### **Being Eritrean in Milan<sup>1</sup>**

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This research concerns the Eritrean community resident in Milan where it originated at least forty years ago. In this paper, I reflect on how to work on the Eritrean perceptions of the self as a community away from their native country; on the views on differences and similarities between each other and those considered to be outside this community; and on the memories of the past of people with different personal and social histories, and loyalties. Moreover, since this research relates to the formation of identities and perceptions of the self among a migrant community, all the relevant issues are being collected and analysed with the awareness that movement, dislocation, and re-location have great impact on the perceptions of "home" and of the self in cultural, historical and social terms. I'm looking not only at individuals and their experiences and how they relate to the past, present and future, but I'm also searching for the wider forces that constitute their present identities. Memory, societal structures, transnational links, daily practices and discourses are seen as forces to be elaborated in this research. However, greater attention is devoted to issues arising around how categories of "us" and "them" are shaped, away from the sending context, which has been furthermore a conflicting one due to the wars with Ethiopia. To understand the shape of the formation of categories, I not only focus on Eritreans themselves but also on Milanese citizens and other migrants with whom they share the city. The attention on identity formation always presents dangers in notions of its authenticity and underlines the relevancy of considering the contextual and historical complexities that involve individuals in a creative negotiation with the surrounding contexts. Therefore it is useful to explain the processual formation of identity through concepts of multipositionality and of ambivalence between discourses and practices.

The anthropology of identity has had a long history from the colonial description of the "tribe" to the modern studies on "ethnicity". As a discipline, anthropology tends to study the "other". Although not all anthropological studies focus specifically on identity formation, there is often an attention to social categories and an analysis of their constitution. By focusing on the "anthropos", the human being, the spotlight on categories is practically intrinsic in the type of gaze itself. Generally, anthropology is a type of analysis which tends to describe, shape and often create typologies of cultures and societies. The creation of papers and scripts does not only concern linguistic descriptions and theoretical analyses; the study of society often has wider impacts and becomes incorporated in social definitions of otherness and difference. The example of the latter statement can be broadly seen in the anthropology of the colonial period, which often supported the colonial apparatus in controlling and in ruling their subjects by dividing them into different "tribes". Anthropologists have thus had, and still have, the power to shape the other and to theorise about people's lives, socialising norms and practices (this power however must not be overestimated, as I will argue later). It is because of their participation in the constitution of social discourses that anthropologists need to be reflexive and cautious in collecting data, reporting and transcribing it into literature. This underlying awareness has been brought out especially by the last decade's turns and trends such as postmodernism and feminism, which have upset anthropology and many other disciplines, and have inspired deeper discussions on research methodologies as well as on their outcomes. Through this latter analysis on the implications of anthropological studies on society, there has also been a greater application of all forms of reflexivity during fieldwork and in all the other stages of the research. This paper therefore points to the need to reflect even before fieldwork itself. My aim here is not only to reflect on my work in progress and the ways in which I approach the field and the data, but also to understand the ways in which identities have changed form and meaning in anthropological literature and in the social domain of discourses and practices.

Thus, the research unfolds as a description of a work in progress with its theoretical and epistemological concerns and methodologies. The theoretical background is divided into four parts and deals with four different aspects of the epistemology. The first part elaborates the constitution of identity through history. Here I describe the change and development

of concepts such as race, ethnicity and nationalism, through the history of the Horn of Africa and its colonial relations with Italy and Ethiopia. Furthermore I emphasise the importance that the concepts of ethnicity and nationalism have nowadays in relation to the conflict with Ethiopia and the outcomes in loyalties and individual positioning. The historical development of concepts of difference will also be a useful background in my future elaboration on how ideas of race and bounded cultures are still inscribed in the ways Italians perceive the other. The structure that Eritreans have left behind by migrating to Italy is still present in their lives nearly as much as the receiving context. In fact the second part deals with the politics of identity where both the individuals and the structures come into play. By having its own politics of identity, such as policies of inclusion and exclusion and the rights to citizenship, every nation-state forces individuals to act and negotiate through its structures. Introducing the core anthropological concern on discourses and practices, the following part looks into identity formation through which I appreciate transnationalism, memories, loyalties and the embodiment of culture. The two forces, the mnemonic one and the structural one, which shape the constitution of identity, should be looked at not only in the ways people talk about them but how they embody ideas of the self through practices. Here identity is observed in its networks, in the ways people shape communities and loyalties, and therefore, the ways in which they constitute the self in relation to others. Through three specific sections I investigate the different forces that are affecting identity constitution among Eritreans in Milan. Methodology is discussed through the appreciation of the "field". This last part of the paper is related to the previous theoretical sections, expanding on issues previously raised and explaining the ways through which I'm exploring the field. Identity here is explored through some hypotheses on consumption of space and of meaningful objects. The focus is cast on the relation between culture and the body, the embodiment of identity.

*Identity and the development of concepts of ethnicity and nationalism through time and space*

Migration is such a loaded aspect of society that it not only becomes visible in policy making, in the jurisdictional, political and economic sectors, but also it is very widely discussed in the media and in many other social contexts. This anthropological research on identity formation

through migratory experiences specifically wants to contextualise the formation of social categories; by deconstructing them it intends to identify the implications that these have on individuals. Here, I reflect on categories constructed under the Italian colonisation and the ways in which they still continue under other guises. Through a preliminary analysis of their conceptualisation, race, ethnicity and nationalism are understood not as given natures of peoples but as social constructs. Specifically, in present times ethnicity often becomes instrumental to those who have interests in extorting memories and advancing conflicts in the name of a symbolised identity.

### *History and imagined communities*

Historical contingencies here are connected to questions of memory and self-identity. Disruption is thus often related to the difficult history starting from the period of Italian colonialism (1889-1942). After the Italian defeat in 1942 there was a period of transition in which a British mandate was initially installed; following the decision by the League of Nations, Eritrea became a federation in the Ethiopian nation state in 1952. The subsequent annexation in 1962 of the Eritrean territory into Haile Selassies empire brought about complex reactions and fragmented discursive nationalistic rhetoric in Eritrea. At this time, there were many attempts to constitute what it meant to be Eritrean. First, there was an Islamic movement opposed to the Ethiopian imposition not only of Amharic<sup>2</sup> as the official language but most of all to the Orthodox Church<sup>3</sup> as the national faith. After the organisation of the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), the EPLF (Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front) was born with its ideology insisting instead on a multiethnic Eritrean nation. There was however another contemporary movement, which fought for the continuation of unity with Ethiopia. In the following years there was organised guerrilla warfare between these three different factions and after some years the EPLF gained the majority's consent. It was at this time between the seventies and the nineties that Eritreanness was constituted as the founding ideology for an independent Eritrean nation-state (officially achieved only in 1993) and its long-lasting conflict with Ethiopia.

The description of colonial history allows an analysis of the constitution of perceptions of the self, in relation to "the other" on both sides, the

Italian and the Eritrean one. Thus, the period of the Italian colonisation of Eritrea can be identified as the beginning of the differentiation of Eritreanness from Ethiopianness, hence the rise of such ideas of identities as uniform wholes. Before the Italian invasion and the contemporary scramble for Africa by the European super powers, identity was most likely perceived in other terms. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the territories of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia were composed of different chiefdoms, which had trading relations between each other and with people along the Red Sea and other neighbours (Selassie 1980). We can imagine that there were similarities and differences between and within groups, and that views of the "other" were often perceived in terms of religion and/or geographic location and/or language, but probably not bounded into nationalities or ethnicities, nor essentialised and naturalised in the ways they tend to be now. It has been argued many times that the idea of homogeneity according to religion, culture and language within a defined territory is in fact a recent one.

The constitution of ideas as a whole, identified with a nation, is recognisable in the West as an outcome of the rise of capitalism and the use of the press for mass consumption from the nineteenth century (Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1983 and Anderson 1991). In the African context it can instead be understood as a post-colonial symptom. Yet different identities were shaped in the same period as in the West, not in the order of nation building as in Europe, but as categories imposed by the colonial administration. During colonialism the super powers acted as sovereign nations with specific boundaries, while at the same time they "regionalised" and "tribalised" their subjects in the colonies. These classification systems fixed previously unbounded notions of culture and religion in the same ways as nation building proceeded in the West. Though they were contrarily used to differentiate into tribes and clans, to divide rather than unify their subjects, favouring some and neglecting others, ranking peoples through dichotomies based on notions of race, civilization, and religion. This colonial surgery has had a huge impact on the ways in which African liberation movements have imagined their nations and have competed for political power since independence.

*Italian colonialism and "la questione della razza"*<sup>4</sup>

The premises for the analysis of the Italian colonial period in Eritrea arise from the fact that at the time when the Italian government decided on its politics of expansion Italy itself was a newly born nation-state. Most of the citizens did not yet know what it meant to be Italian and to belong to a nation-state. Moreover, the state itself was not mature in its structures. Since Italy did not provide sufficient facilities in all its territory, an enormous number of emigrants were moving abroad in search for work. Consequently, the decision to colonise was not due to the quest for primary resources abroad or to expand a saturated economy, which was the motivation for British or French colonialism. Italy still needed to constitute itself as a nation in all its internal structures and ideologies. Thus colonialism was a reaction to the lack of consent and nationalistic feelings and to achieve hegemonic power *in Italy*. It has been recounted that the Italian civilians in the Eritrean colony in the early years ridiculously numbered fewer than twenty people (Rainero 2001). Nonetheless, although it failed to colonise in the same organised and economically effective way as other superpowers, it cannot be argued, as often happens, that Italian colonisation had no impact and, therefore, that historical memory can be dismissed simply with an embarrassed smile. In present days, the issues around the lack of post-colonial reflection needs to be thoroughly dealt with. This premise to an analysis of Italian colonialism needs to be spelled out in order to understand the context, which spooned the obsession in defining bounded categories of racially, culturally and religiously differentiated subjects in the colony.

The first period was characterised by a stance identifiable with the patriotic ideal of an Italian "civilising" mission towards the "primitive" Eritrean population. Ethnographers such as Alberto Pollera were hired to facilitate an understanding of the subjects and, therefore, to achieve more means of control. Ethnography was, at this time (1985-1920 circa), used to sustain the customary law through which the administration of the colony was supported. Ethnography was thus combined with the employment of local chiefs, the manipulation of customs, and the mapping of the territory. The Italian colonial period before the arrival of Fascism had already, in many ways, fixed ideas of an Eritrean territory not only with defined boundaries, but also with internal differentiations and divisions, often in terms of "grades" of civilisation of the subjects. Dur-

ing the second period with the Fascist colonialism, there was no such contact with the native population. The two periods differ drastically in their rhetoric, linguistic meanings and discourses, and in the formulation of policies and laws. With the rise of Fascism the previous interpretations of difference, which not only related to a biological definition, but also to a social and historical understanding, disappeared. With the Empire, the civilising mission was over and replaced by a sort of apartheid in limited terms of race. Although the level of racial components of the Eritrean population was recognised as superior to that of other "Negroes" (Biasutti 1941), still the Fascist racial classification system created not only a legitimised climax of terror and violence, but also discriminations between the various groups. The change, however, did not happen suddenly; it was instead a slow process in which old colonial administrators were moved from one position to another, with the final intent of getting rid of them and substituting them with the newly recruited colonial officers, trained with the ideology of the Fascist regime. This trend is revealed in the biography of Alberto Pollera, colonial administrator and ethnographer during the first period of Italian colonialism and who was slowly but meaningfully rejected during Fascism (Sòrgoni, 2001).

The ethnographic attention that was building up in the first period followed particular lines of enquiry such as that found in Polleras work. The terms of classification and categorisation of administrative units by which research was carried out certainly determined the answers that referred to essentialised, uniform and bounded groups. Though, as Fardon (2000) briefly argues, this is due to the fact that those ethnographers were also administrators for the same colonial administration that was posing the questions of enquiry. The following Fascist attention to the "questione della razza", the race issue, was not applied through ethnographic enquiry but through bio-measurements and descriptions of typologies of physical connotations among different grades of racially defined groups. Ethnographers at this point were a hindrance for the new regime of truth since they were questioning the differences between human beings through attentions to variables other than bone structures. Anthropology in many ways supported the dominant discourse during the first "civilising" period. Though, as was argued by Sòrgoni, it was appreciated more for its provision of maps and brief and easily understandable descriptions of tribes and clans in the appendices. Pollera,

however, not only focused on those dominant issues. He was also describing processes by which groups shape certain customs rather than others in more complex terms than the ones quoted by the administration. It is true, therefore, that he never stood up to explain that his work should be read in its complexities.

Here arises the question concerning the power of anthropology. The interpretations of anthropological work, by those commissioning it, certainly determined more than what the ethnographer actually wrote. This does not mean that the way in which people were described should be acceptable in modern anthropological debates, but that the analysis carried out by Pollera was at that time probably groundbreaking in many aspects. Moreover, as Kuper (1995) argues, anthropology was often not listened to and even mocked. Ethnographic work was rarely commissioned from professional anthropologists, but rather from those who were amateurs of the discipline while being, career-wise, colonial administrators. The problem therefore resides not so much in how the ethnography of the colonial period, such as Polleras, produced and reproduced those static identities but how this intellectual work was used by the colonial administration at that time and by liberation movements later.

### *Liberation and Nationalism*

“Did Africans swallow ethnicisation wholesale simply by adopting the European gaze and without projects of their own?” (Fardon, 2000: 146). Obviously the answer is no. The recurrent argument of the influences of European colonisation on ideas of the self is often overemphasised in terms of a passivity of the African subjects. It has now been confirmed by many scholars that the European gaze shaped ways of defining the African self, but that “modern” ethnicity that has grown since colonialism has more complex character than that of being a simple clone of European ideologies. This passage by Turton clearly explains the spirit of ethnicisation in the contemporary scramble for power:

First there is the extreme fear and hatred that ethnic difference is capable of arousing in people who formerly lived together as neighbours. Second, there is the use of ethnicity by political leaders to mobilise their followers and manipu-

late the international community, a strategy which is not only deliberate but also cynical, because it requires at least some degree of detachment from the collective emotions it plays upon. Third, there is the use of electronic media for the global dissemination of images of grief, suffering and destruction brought about by the ethnic enemy. Fourth, there is the territorial imperative of ethnic nationalism: the appeal to a selective remembered and invented past to justify current claims to territory. And finally, [...] the characteristic readiness of nationalist leaders everywhere to sacrifice the lives of their followers, supposedly to advance the cause of that abstract entity, the nation, but in reality to extend and consolidate their own hold on political power (1997:1).

In Turton's passage, the fourth and the final points are especially connected with the previous argumentation around colonialism and anthropology and they are, moreover, useful for the discussion of how the contemporary form of Eritrean national identity was constituted. The "territorial imperative" and its combination with the imagination of an historical justification are very relevant in the case of Eritrean liberation movements. The sacrifice of lives in order to pursue nation building is another extremely important issue to have in mind since millions have died and this has really soaked into the memories of Eritreans. In both issues, it is the strategy of the political, nationalist leaders that needs to be understood in this section, since in many ways they have channelled the whole of Eritrea into a nation built with bloodshed. As has been argued by Araya (1997), before 1974 the imagining of Eritrea was fragmented and contentious. The liberation movements had so many conflicting views of what to fight for that they ended up in guerrilla warfare. From 1974 onwards it was the EPLF who incorporated many fighters under the same name, thus building a strategic ideology which was bound to work in moving the civilians into the struggle for liberation. The fight against Ethiopia was often quoted by the EPLF leaders as the unifying issue which increasingly constituted the national identity; the ideology of nationalism was constituted more by the hatred for the Ethiopian enemy than by the love for Eritrean similarities and shared past.

Therefore, the selected history chosen by the nationalists was based on the Eritrean "colonised past", not so much the Italian but more the Ethiopian one (Minority Rights Group 1983).

To a large extent, intellectual work contributed to the selection of the history and symbols incorporated in the memory of the Eritrean nation. Gramsci, in his work, often emphasises the role of intellectuals in building ideologies to be thereafter applied not only in the constitution of political parties, but also to be incorporated in civil society as motors for revolution. Intellectuals have largely, though sometimes even unwillingly, brought their influences to bear on issues of ethnicity and nationalism. The work of historical reconstruction and political activism from abroad, by Eritrean refugees and émigrés, has certainly been deliberate. Nationalists have often manoeuvred previous histories and ethnographies in order to support their theses. Even the work by Westerners interested in determining the nature of ethnicity and nationalism has had its impact. Talking about identities in one way or another often ends up being a resource for political rhetoric. Political activists, on their part, not only maintain and construct ideologies through symbolic tokens and memories to support their activities, but also to move civil society. Those leaders, as emphasised above by Turton, are ready "to sacrifice the lives of their followers, supposedly to advance the cause of that abstract entity, the nation, but in reality to extend and consolidate their own hold on political power" (ibid). This can clearly be seen in Eritrean history through those moments in which the EPLF literally eliminated entire opposition groups (Minority Rights Group, 1983) that were diverting the liberation movement through their focus on class-consciousness rather than on ethnicity and regionalism, as the EPLF was doing. The shift that MENKAE, for example, would have furthered was an analysis of the weakness of the EPLF as an elitist movement, pretending to be populist (Araya 1997).

Through this description of the historical path to the present, I do not want to assess the truth of those historical memories that are the fundamentals for nationalism. Contrarily, like Anderson (1991), I wish to understand the ways in which this identity has been imagined and practised. Anthropologically, this latter task can only be followed through peoples discourses and daily practices. The pursuit of this type of data collection and its intrinsic epistemological and philosophical significance is explained in the third part of this paper. Here, I am concerned

with the political and intellectual constitution of loyalties and, therefore, of idioms explaining history and naturalising political ideologies. In the light of the political games nationalists have played, I have included this analysis of the ideological constitution of Eritrean nationalism because it introduces the mnemonic force through which to look at "Eritreanness" in Milan. Eritrean refugees in Italy were highly organised during the seventies with annual meeting in Bologna and Rome. These took place at the time when the discourses of the EPLF started to have relevancy in Eritrea. Migrants and refugees were to large extent the minds and the sponsors of this political activism. Thus, many people have lived abroad intensely hoping and fighting for, and believing in, one ideology or another. Consequently a politically loaded past is affecting the constitution of different memories among the Eritrean community in Milan.

### *Structure and politics of identity*

The previous part contained an analysis of the history of Eritrea and its implications for the constitution of identity. In describing the various ways in which identity has been imagined and used, I encountered the instrumental use of identity by elites and nationalists. This type of historical analysis helps me to understand the political value of the memories of people who have migrated to Italy, or who have applied for political asylum. In continuing on this background analysis, I discuss the institutional influences of the structures in which individuals live now and how these affect the formation of identity. I consider the role of the nation state and its policies and institutional order. This part is positioned after the previous one not only for theoretical reasons but also for the chronological succession of events, from the formation of the nation state of Italy first and of Eritrea later, to the present consolidation of power and application of nationalism within civil society. While the first part focused on the invention and imagination of the nation, this part hinges on the politics reinforcing and reproducing the rhetoric of being a nation and on policies of inclusion and of exclusion which consolidate the imagined community. In this background reconstruction, the discussion leads to an analysis of current policies and rules by which my informants are constrained and enabled and with which they are negotiating through official or unofficial paths.

*Integration and the nation-state*

The nation state is an entity that defines and shapes individuals within. It presumes a model of homogeneity. The nation has an underlying need to constitute a shared language, territory, history and culture, which are perceived as natural and human. After 140 years, throughout the regions of Italy, there is still a perceived difference between the various geographical areas (Pratt, 2002). But the nation has been successfully incorporated into the minds of the Italians who identify with this imagined community when the need arises. In this way, the concept of Italy has become a tool of identification, at times symbolising a need of society to relate to a world that is outside the self-imaginary.

Hobsbawm (1990) thought that the nation was on its last legs. He thought that with the spread of globalisation the nation-state would have to shift to something different, more suitable for the times. Appadurai (1990) and Featherstone (1990) instead argued that nationalism and globalisation are two faces of the same process, trying to cannibalise one another and, at the same time, feeding each other. Whatever the theories say about the nature of this relation, the facts show that these two social processes find it difficult to communicate and to stabilise with each other. One example is directly related to migration. On the one hand, we have a huge flow of people moving in the world often to other wealthier or politically more liberal countries and the need of societies to open up to the inputs arising from a globalising world. On the other hand, we have a conservative idea of community (the nation-state) that does not allow internal difference. The state, therefore, organises itself using conceptual frameworks to explain the contradictions arising from the need for economic overture and social and cultural closure. The nation state as an organisation finds it difficult to merge inclusion and respect for difference and similarities. Thus, we need to understand the effects that different policies have on civil society and on the shape of ethnicity of both the citizens of the nation, and the immigrants who are trying to settle, who are briefly passing through, or who are staying for a short term.

Integration is an awkward mission in the nation state. If it's seen as a coming together of parts into a whole (group, community, society, nation), so as to render it organic and well organised (J. Foot, 1999: 160), it becomes an act of complex surgery inside civil as well as political society. The immediate outcomes might be painful and contradictory.

Contrarily though society as a fluid entity could be appreciated as having the ability to change and adapt to new social relations. In the specific case of the impact of mass immigration, both the host society and the migrants themselves change by interacting with one another. Integration, as a political intervention, in this context becomes even more loaded with constraints and contradictions.

*Integration: the Italian style*

Confronted with the more tangible and incumbent problems that migration unexpectedly brought to Italian society, the policies did not have the means or the time (or were not receptive enough) to harmonise the flux of newcomers and the residents. Problems like housing, health practices, and illegal moonlighting (*lavoro nero*), have found Italian governments unprepared and powerless to act. After twenty years the problem is still unsolved and complex. Laws and policies have been approved without successful results. Confusion and conflict end by ruling the tactics of the state and policy making. But in the same way, as Favell (2002) argues, it is because Italy is a chaotic society that this new emergence of peoples might be integrated in a more elastic way than elsewhere. People find their way through a system that is highly bureaucratic, but for this very reason, they locate other means for organising themselves.

Italy, after all, has a different history of migration from that of other European countries such as the UK and France. This diversity is first of all due to the relative novelty of foreign<sup>5</sup> immigration in Italy, secondly to its lack of colonial and post-colonial relations with the newcomers<sup>6</sup>, and finally to the deficiency of post colonial reflection in the Italian society (Riccio 2000). As pointed out by Favell (2002), another peculiarity that characterises the Italian situation is its economic sector and bureaucracy, which allow relatively easy initial and temporary access to resources, providing low wages in exchange for labour (also Salih 2000). Problems encountered by the Italian society, although very significant, have been exaggerated by the media, where migrants have been pictured as generally responsible for unemployment and involved in criminal activities. Within Italy, there have been various political responses to migration. Bossi, leader of the Lega Lombarda, who demands a change in the constitution in order to include the clandestine and illegal presence

of migrants as prosecutable by law, represents the more common approach.

The Bossi-Fini law is the new Act, which was officially accepted in October, 2002. It intends to identify and expel illegal migrants and deny access to those without a work contract. It paradoxically allows people to stay in the country up to two years if possessing a long-term contract of work, forcing employers to “legalise” their position and that of employees. Moreover, and this is the weakest part of the law, it intends to collect and record the fingerprints of all “legal” migrants. This latter section has been highly criticised by many politicians, intellectuals and central exponents of the public scene. They have above all advanced the accusation that the law would create discrimination and criminalisation of the immigrants and, therefore, Italian citizens should also have their fingerprints on identity cards. Radio Popolare, a left-wing activist radio in Milan, has even collected fingerprints of Milanese residents and immigrants, but rather than that of the index, they asked people to donate the fingerprints of their extended middle finger (!); these fingerprints have then been sent to the government. Members of the Catholic Church have openly discussed the xenophobic character of this law. Many organisations such as Caritas and some churches have even announced that they will continue to shelter “illegal migrants” regardless of the law. The UNHCR<sup>7</sup> has accused this law of denying all rights to asylum seekers and ignoring the entire issue of political asylum.

As the Bossi-Fini law shows, the issues of population movement, legitimacy of movement and asylum seeking are highly sensitive, contested and loaded. It reveals the extent to which ideas of difference are sharply emphasised by the present right-wing government, escalating discrimination and fear. Furthermore, it demonstrates lack of reflection on the social dimensions. The multicultural element has never even been approached; there has been no concern about what type of integration to allow; no interest on the migrants’ social status in the Italian society; nor has there been any analysis of the impacts of this kind of discourse on society itself. This law has passed, but hasn't shown itself fully enacted. This instability is greatly affecting the lives of many Eritreans in Milan, especially those who have recently arrived asking for political asylum. Moreover, the stereotypical categories arising from

this kind of political debate themselves become strong forces in the constitution of the Eritrean self.

### *Practices of Identity*

Great attention has been placed in the social sciences on the issue of the relationship between individual agency and the forces of the structure's systemness. In anthropology, this constituted the initial motor for ethnographic research. In Malinowskis (esp. 1922), for example, we can find the origins of many other anthropological and sociological approaches to the issue. In the functionalist and structuralist analyses of individual agency and social structure, however, the mechanical character of, and the concentration on social stability divert attention to something not empirically applicable (e.g. Parsons, 1951 and Giddens, 1984). Experience through fieldwork is what is needed to understand the dynamics that occur between the institutional organizations and their practitioners, and the people using the facilities, who are therefore "integrated" within society. It is not the question of rules and regulations which most concerns the research. The focus on agency must be applied through looking at the "little politics of daily life". After discussing the politics of identity in the Italian structural context and investigating the dynamics of integration in the nation-state, it is thus necessary to elaborate on the ways in which individuals live the proprieties of modern society. Individuals in this structural formation have to interact within its rules, and negotiate in order to be included. The structure is not something detached from the individual, since the former does not exist without the latter. Individual and collective actions and discourses are thus producing and reproducing the structure in which they live. The dynamic between structure and agency is therefore a fundamental issue in this research and it is dealt with through an analysis of discourse and practice.

### *Plurinational subjects and transnationalism*

In the transnational context which my research examines, individuals are engaged with more than one of these structures. In migratory experiences individuals often find themselves duelling not only with the hosting society, but also with the sending nation. The ways in which individuals live in transnational contexts constitute them as "plurinational subjects" (Salih, 2000). By the term plurinational subjects, Salih

explicitly emphasises the fact that people living in more than one structure will need to negotiate with the rules and regulations of both societies: the sending and the receiving one. With this term she intends to describe those new citizens who move to Italy but, nonetheless, want to keep their citizenship in their home country. To do this, these people need to engage with the structures of both nation-states, becoming not only participants in both societies, but also subject to their systems.

Transnational patterns are found in those practices occurring beyond the boundaries of a nation. There has been great attention to the ways in which migrants and refugees live their lives across nations, the sending and the receiving one. This has been called transnationalism and has been widely discussed across disciplines (Vertovec, 1999; Basch et al., 1994; and Al-Ali et al., 2001a). Transnationalism has been widely examined in its relation with nation building. As has been briefly noted in the historical analysis, the states and liberation movements have promoted transnationalism as a means for nation building. Transnational activities are therefore not a novelty, but have increased their visibility in recent times through the development of media, international communication and the movement not only of ideas but also of material products and money. Different groups and individuals, however, do not experience transnationalism in the same way. Transnational activities need to be understood in their single cases and in their changes.

The Eritrean state has devoted considerable attention to its diaspora. Efforts have been made - by the EPLF before liberation (in Minority Rights Group, 1983 and in Al Ali et al., 2001a,b) and by the PFDJ (Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice), the present ruling party in the government - to keep Eritreans abroad active in helping their homeland. The government demands payment, as the liberation movement previously did, of two per cent of wages earned abroad. During the last war with Ethiopia (1998-2001) the percentage increased. In 1993, during the election for the independence of Eritrea as a nation, all those abroad were given the rights to vote. The Eritrean state and embassies also often organise events, such as conferences and music festivals and so on, encouraging Eritreans abroad to identify with a transnational community always in contact with the sending nation-state. Al-Ali et al. (2001a,b) have noticed that in Germany and the UK the social pressure to respect these dynamics was so high that donations were publicly shown on boards stating the names and the amounts paid. Other remittances, such

as family responsibilities and bureaucratic affairs have been described as forms of "forced transnationalism", leading refugees and migrants to an evident involvement with the sending context.

In the milieu of Eritrean communities in Germany and in the UK, Al-Ali, Koser and Black have noticed the visible difference between the "culture of remittances" (2001a,b) and transnational links before the last conflict and how peoples are experiencing their relation with the homeland in present times. Some have been caught in the rhetoric of Eritrea "as the victim of more populous, more powerful and internationally-supported neighbour bent on recolonisation" (2001a: 595) and, therefore, supported the nation in stronger ways. Many, however, are now disenchanted with the politics of the PFDJ<sup>8</sup> which has monopolised political power and has engaged Eritrea in the recent conflict with Ethiopia, costing thousands of lives and great suffering, but also bringing the country to an economic situation even worse than the previous one. Therefore, the consent that was previously more or less widespread among the Eritrean diaspora has now changed. It is therefore very interesting to understand the impact which recent events have left on the transnational practices linked with the state and with kin ties.

#### *The constitution of the homeland*

Transnational practices, however, are not limited to those described above. The transnational levels at which my research looks, are not only related to the movement of money or goods through remittances from the host country to Eritrea. On the contrary, I am engaged above all with the opposite dynamic, that of the movement of goods, ideas and so on from Eritrea to Italy. In this research, the daily practices are followed in their multiplicity of layers and positions. Loyalties are recorded not so much in relation to people's involvement in the reconstruction of Eritrea but more in relation with their lives in Milan. Transnationalism is therefore a concept leading to the elaboration of ideas of "home", "community" and the constitution of the self abroad.

Malkki's ethnography of displacement clearly shows how the experienced deterritorialisation often affects refugees in shaping "attachments to specific territories and links between people, polity and territory" (1995: 1). Furthermore, her research demonstrates that there are struggles over history and truth coming into play. The comparative nature of

her fieldwork revealed different “communities of memory” (Malkki, 1997) that have arisen in two different contexts. The research focused on Hutu refugees in Tanzania who were displaced after the genocides in Burundi and Rwanda between 1993 and 1994. Malkki carried out fieldwork in a refugee camp and among town refugees. The different shapes of identity that the researcher has noticed are striking. Refugees in the camp were describing a primordial social harmony among the original Hutu nation. They saw themselves as a “nation in exile” (Malkki, 1995: 3). The town refugees were instead seeking ways of assimilating multiple and shifting identities. “In the course of the everyday, those in town were creating not a heroized national identity, but rather a lively cosmopolitanism - a worldliness that led the camp refugees to see them as an impure, problematic element in the ‘total community’ of the Hutu refugees heroized as people in exile” (ibid). The contrast between the historical-national identity of the camp refugees and the cosmopolitan one of the Hutu living in the town shows the multiplicity of “communities of memory”, which arise among displaced people in different contexts.

Povrzanovic's fieldwork among the Croatian diaspora in Sweden shows another type of differentiation in the imagination of the homeland. In this research the author has noted that there is no unified “Croatian Diaspora”, since it entails an ensemble of different homeland experiences, different positions in the countries of residence and generational differences. People with diverse experiences are however often involved in the creation and re-creation of diasporic discourses and politics. The celebration of national symbols constitutes a high emotional significance which is also opposed to the prohibitions under the previous Yugoslav communist regime. Povrzanovic, therefore noticed the symbolisms that unified many Croats under the dream of the homeland. The dream though was privately experienced in many different ways by different peoples. The wish to return was alive for some and was completely absent for others who contrarily lived the idea of return with fear and pain. The different perceptions of the homeland and emotions linked with it depended on the individual experiences which had led to their exile and on the positions they hold in the host society (Povrzanovic, 1999).

The insight in these two researches demonstrates to what extent refugee-ness, displacement and diaspora need to be understood in their pluralities and multiplicity of voices. Moreover the issues of

### *Alternate Routes*

transnationalism in contexts where individuals are duelling with pain and violence become more complex in their significance and perceptions. The peculiarities of individual experiences conflate with the lack of comprehension often present among the host community. The anxieties and insecurities with which many transnational people live are augmented by the policies not always allowing inclusion and by the lack of understanding and historical memory of the mainstream of the Italian society. These dynamics are now included during fieldwork through a focus on discourse and practice and through an analysis of the relation between the large scale of Italian society and the small scale of social life in Milan. Thus, identity is present through this search for the forces within people's practices and discourses.

### *Discourse, practice and embodiment*

Discourse and practice are the realms of the anthropological debate. Both the historical and the structural-institutional contexts are to be understood as important milieus. They provide great insight into the heart of the issues relevant to this research and they are basilar for an understanding of exegesis and day-to-day practices among Eritrean communities in Milan. Thus, since the research wants to go beyond structure and mnemonics, the epistemology supporting the fieldwork needs to be spelled in order to introduce the methodology which will be dealt with in the next section.

Discourse is in itself a multi-faceted concept intrinsically linked with the linguistic formation through which people explain their perception of reality. In recent debates, though, discourse has been conceptualised as the production and reproduction of social understandings. The Foucauldian analysis has been widely applied to streams of debates included in the post-modern turn. The ideological concern, prevalent in Marxist analysis, has been further developed through discourse analysis. Ideology, with its (Marxist) implicit idea of alienation, has been expanded in a theoretical appreciation of individual production and re-production of discourses. Discourse is therefore a concept used to explain those topical formations of reality in which every individual is involved. Although the formation of discursive explanations do not constrain themselves solely to a linguistic reality, in Foucault's analysis, discourse is a regime of truth which pervades practice as well as language. In many ways dis-

course is like an ideology not produced by the powerful elite which alienates the working class to keep the means of production. Discourse is not something over which someone has the power of manipulation (Foucault, 1980). Every individual is, in fact, subjected to it and at the same time empowers it by re-producing it. It is a snake with no head and no tail.

Practice has instead been the focus of the phenomenological trend (starting from Bourdieu and continuing through M. Jackson and H. Moore) privileging an attention to performance rather than linguistic exegesis. In this approach, there is a conceptualisation of praxis as something that comprehends the dialectics occurring between structure and agency, and between the material and symbolic domains, away from linguistic interpretations. Experience becomes the concern through which the relation between the self and the other is understood. The attention to practical engagement shifts away the structuralist concern about the individual's act of following predefined social rules and norms. The phenomenological and experiential focus also reduces the importance of the social structure by explaining symbolic and ritual practices as concrete bodily engagements, rather than as abstractions depending on the social structures themselves.

In the same way as the Foucauldian analyses do, phenomenological approaches have developed a theory in which the individual participates in social processes rather than being passively adapted to a-priori rules and meanings. What thus links the two trends is the fact that the individual is not a passive nor alienated being who reproduces something residing outside. Neither does the involvement of the individual imply that s/he is independent and, therefore, may completely detach her/himself from shared meanings. Moreover, the concept which links but at the same time differentiates the two trends is that of embodiment. In Foucault's analysis of institutions such as the clinic (1973) and the prison (1977), language and categorisation shape the bodies of individuals. The gaze, through which discourse is imprinted, is an embodiment of the linguistic formation of reality; but at the same time, by applying categories on the body, it produces embodiment. There is, therefore, a relation between language and practice in Foucault but it is the former which shapes the latter. In the analysis by Bourdieu (1977), the experience of the body itself is the motor for embodiment. In his analysis, cognition is not a state of the mind, its a process occurring in the body; he is thus not

talking about knowledge but about embodiment. Social incorporation is not simply a sterile reproduction of symbolic frameworks but a process of acquisition. He identifies embodiment through communication; the learning of how to act is achieved through the body, creating memory, posture and feelings. Thus social incorporation is achieved through experience. The linguistic exegesis most of the time does not achieve logical explanations of action; it is action itself which shows the meanings. Action therefore is the meaning itself. These two stances differ in their focuses. In the first it is discourse which produces and reproduces regimes of truth, and in the latter, it is practice which shows social incorporations. The two stances, one leaning to language, the other to practice, are asking different questions.

The Foucauldian discourse analysis has, in fact, opened the path towards an understanding of the force that linguistic explanations have on reality. I apply this perspective to understand the Italian policies and their discursive influence on people's ideas of the other. Moreover, this view leads to the questions on the implications of the discursive formations on individuals. I am thus looking for the ways in which the categories formed by the Italian mainstream affect the ways Eritreans act, and embodying the gaze which is defining them. At the same time I am interested in the ways in which discourses of identity are produced and reproduced among the Eritrean communities in Milan. The work by Povrzanovic has shown how people may be reproducing symbologies and sharing unified ideologies, while in their day-to-day practices and in their dreams they interpret discourses in different ways through their personal experiences and their specific positions in society.

Practice and experience are very useful conceptual tools to understand what I call the "politics of little things". Questions around the embodiment of social practices are thus dealt with through a particular attention to the body and consumption. There is also an interest in understanding the religious experiences of Coptic Orthodox Eritreans in Milan, focusing not on the doctrinal nature of religion but on the process of acquisition of belief and ritual meanings. The phenomenological approach is also interesting as a methodology for research. The experiential scope is needed to understand the field in its humanity, through the eyes of a human being. Moore (1999) and Jackson (1989) have explained that it is important to look not only into the particularities of the field of study and its local exegesis but also into the link that the

peculiarities of every social field have with each other. The general focus on what they like to call human experience is important to surpass the relativistic approach which would arise out of the sole attention to specificity and difference. On the other hand, the Foucauldian discourse analysis leads the researcher to reflect on his/her own words and re-productions of existing discourses and power dynamics, and forces the anthropological gaze to be aware of its impacts and interpretations. Both approaches are therefore useful for the research.

### ***Methodology and Fieldwork***

#### *The site*

Eritrean discourses and practices are looked at specifically from the context of an extended and complex city such as Milan where there is room for a variety of perceptions of the self, networks allowing transnational social economic and symbolic activities - affecting identity, narratives and practices of cultural negotiation, and different spheres of resistance to social and economic marginalisation, and subjection to the nation-state. The field is one of the focal Italian Eritrean locations in which the Eritrean community began with the first arrival of immigrants in the sixties. As receiving milieu, Milan has a long past with articulated conceptions beginning with the arrival of people from southern Italy throughout the twentieth century and before. In Milan, the "other" was previously branded with the southern migrant workers, and then switched to the recent foreign arrivals, thus continuing to use similar discourses of intrusion, invasion and criminalisation. As J. Foot (1999) argues, the Milanese site is remarkable in its experiences of migration. Additionally, the focus on the Eritrean case in Milan is significant because its history stretches across almost half a century. Eritreans, therefore, not only experience the present political environment, but also some of them have encountered various periods of Italian political culture. They have been dealing with issues of citizenship and difference through time in different ways. The newly arrived asylum seekers are negotiating with the system in yet other ways.

The area in Milan where the first Eritrean migrants moved in the sixties is still the social area where Eritrean restaurants, bars and clubs are located today. Porta Venezia has now become a central area of the city. Corso Buenos Aires is a sort of high street swarming with shops, commercial businesses and street sellers, with some organised little market

stalls cutting through the middle of the area. On both sides of Corso Buenos Aires the Eritrean community is found. It was one of the first foreign migrant neighbourhood to form in Milan. But now they are a small minority among the various foreign communities that share this space in Porta Venezia. In fact, not only Eritreans are found there, but also Ethiopians and people from other countries. Here, there are Eritrean bars, restaurants and clubs. There are also phone shops and Internet cafes which serve the purpose of continuing transnational ties; these are run by different peoples and only one of these is Eritrean. In the same area, one might notice that there are different businesses run by Italians, for example old ironmongers, who have remained small and humble. Contrarily, some shops have followed the "ethnic" fashion and sell African objects and hand-made crafts sophisticatedly Europeanised, and sold at high prices. Although this area of Milan is characterised by the presence of people from Eritrea, now it has moved on to be a mixture of many peoples. Porta Venezia remains a socialising context although not all Eritreans are actually living there; in fact, since housing is very difficult to find, people have spread into more peripheral areas. The various religious communities, the Eritrean Coptic Church, the Catholic Eritrean Church and the Mosques are situated in other areas of the city.

In Porta Venezia I am collecting data on the politics of identity happening within the Eritrean community, where a conflict has been noticed between the "new ones" who have arrived asking for asylum, and those participating with the official side of the previously constituted community. The latter are instigating a strong form of nationalism that points to the young arrivals as deserters and, therefore, as opposing to the political line of the PFDJ. Instead, the new ones are struggling with the slow enactment of the Bossi-Fini act and are sharing memories of years of limbo in the territories that divide Eritrea from Italy. Here, communities of memories show themselves through performances and visual imagery about the home country and Eritrean culture.

The second site where I am slowly entering is one of the council estates where many Eritreans live. Here I wish to understand the daily life of people of different generations, memories and experiences. While Porta Venezia is a socialising terrain the latter is more of a mixture of daily encounters. Here, it is the marginality and the inequality of the people living in these forgotten corners of the city that must be looked at. Through an understanding of living conditions shared by many people of

poor backgrounds, integration is analysed in its multiple realities. To collect data in this context I am working for a community project run by a few coordinators, the secretary (me), the president and most of all university students who are volunteers. It is a bottom-up committee which provides political, cultural, and social spaces for the tenants of three council estates. This role is enabling me to look into the daily life from very close; here, I wish to collect data not only on the Eritrean community but also on their integration in this Italian context, through an understanding of the various structures and institutions, and through an attention to the linguistic formations among the tenants, and also among the people involved in this community project.

### *Participant observation*

There is the need to carry out fieldwork in a multiplicity of levels. The socialising areas illustrated above is a place to “hang around”; the Coptic Churches is part of a specific case study; the personal and family environment is dealt through the collection of life histories, and through individual and group interviews and informal relationships. The Italian field of discourses and practices will be followed in non-governmental organisations and institutions. Specifically, I'm working, thus participating and observing, in the community project mentioned above which deals with life quality in a council estate area where many Eritreans live. I'm also achieving access to governmental and non-governmental organisations for refugees and migrants. It's important to understand how the “*mediazione culturale*”, cultural mediation, is taught to teachers and alums in the educational system and in other institutions. Above all I'm very interested in observing how and where the new Bossi-Fini law is being applied. Throughout the many sites, I'm collecting data on practices of negotiation and resistance and not only on reproduction of societal norms. The multisided-ness of the fieldwork is fundamental to understand the multipositionality of individuals. As in everything, the butterfly effect is present and active in more sites than those specifically involved with the matter. Although the insight into multisited fieldwork has been firstly approached through an analysis of globalising effects on society (Marcus 1995 and Gupta and Ferguson 1997), the need for this type of research stems from the porous nature of society not solely in present times.

In the wideness of the context in which I need to look, there is a specific and more focused attention to three fields of study. The first is on ideas of collectivity and community ties and is generally dealt throughout the fieldwork in this multisitedness, but more specifically in Porta Venezia and in the community project in which I collaborate. The second is topical and followed through two case studies, one focusing on a place and community -the Coptic Church-, the other looking into the consumption of Imnet, the sacred earth, which is a commodity arriving from Eritrea. The third is focusing on the individual and personal responses, negotiation and perceptions and is being carried out through intensive collection of life histories and the participation in family reunions and intimate contexts. Through these three levels of interaction and experiences I wish to understand the multiplicities of identity, the pluralities of sites in which these are shaped, the ways in which they fluidly change according to situations, time and space and how discourses may be sometimes ambiguously framed not always in accordance to practice.

### *The Church*

The study of the Eritrean Orthodox Coptic Church is very important given that many studies on migrant communities in Italy have focused on Mosques and Islamic belief (Carter 1999, Riccio 2000, and Salih 2000). Italian society is pervaded with Catholic rhetoric and discourses flowing especially in the encounters with the "other" - more and more identified with Islamic people. This classification, however, becomes generalised to often include migrants from different backgrounds and religions. The 'other' becomes identified not only with the foreigner but also with people of different religions. The focus on a Christian community is interesting since it entails an attention to its recognitions (or lack of recognition) of relatedness but yet of otherness. On the other hand, some kind of classification and differentiation is constituted among Copts who have had conflicting moments with the Muslim branch of the liberation movement, and with the Catholic followers (often linked to Italian colonial officials and missionaries). The Church is a context in which categories of "us" and "them" are shaped and performed.

The relationship with Catholic Church organisations is growing since some religious members are active in their opposition to the present state of political debates and practices around migration. In Milan especially,

the activity of Cardinal Martini, who has just retired in the summer of the year 2002, has been posing interesting frames for understanding the hardship that the Bossi-Fini law and similar rhetoric have in relation to the occurring social change. He has stated that it would be detrimental, if not anachronistic and impossible to revert the social process of overture and pluralism which is taking place in Milan through recent migratory processes. Caritas and many other Catholic organisations -as already stated above- have started an opposition movement, which does not only publicly deny consent to the present government, but which moreover has become a site of political and social asylum for those that the state wants to reject. There are interesting developments of resistance against the present politics of identity and of exclusion which are moreover led by some branches of the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> It's therefore very motivating to look at the development of relations between the various religious communities and their struggles.

The Church often plays an organisational role; the outcome and experience of migratory processes frequently depends upon and is closely related to the religious institutions in the host country (Riccio 2000). Thus I'm looking at this aspect of the Coptic Church in its transnational links and its role of mediator for people arriving from Eritrea. This position and responsibility of the Church most probably influences the constitution of discursive frames of reference and practices. Questions around this issue regard the ways in which the Church becomes a force in the constitution of identities and of loyalties. The Church often ends up being a site where people escape from the outside world (Block 1992) through its moral guidance. Contemporary it also becomes a context in which there is not only one fixed and applied shape of identity; there are negotiations. Thus religion is a field to be looked at in the ways in which people also contest and oppose discourses around authenticity, tradition and modernity (Salih 2000). Politics of identity occur in diverse contexts and are not one-way projects; they are shaped by discourse and practices which entail individual involvement and experiences in creating the field.

### *The Sacred Earth*

The religious practices are followed in the Church every Sunday and in every other occasion and they are also analysed through a related case study entailing another gaze and point of view. There is a focus on the

sacredness of objects. Sanctified substances, generally called Tsabel, will be linked with theories on consumption -regarded as and compared with commodities holding special roles and meanings- and the body and embodiment. Out of all the religious goods, such as holy water, bread, crosses,<sup>10</sup> it is the sanctified earth, Imnet, that has called for special attention. The earth comes from Coptic Monasteries in Ethiopia and Eritrea; it is sanctified by the Monk and then used as a medicine by ingestion or application on the skin. During my preliminary fieldwork in November 2001 some informants told me about its use in Milan. Kin members in Eritrea send it to them when needed. There appears to be a transnational movement of this substance, which remains still in small scale and without a highly developed consumerist element.

Some insight may be achieved from an Appadurais analysis of exchange and value, which allows a description of Imnet as a commodity of some kind. Its cultural criteria must be understood in context referring to destination, metamorphosis and diversion. The journey from production to consumption is a great insight to elaborate on its meanings and values. This quote from Marx defines the relation between value and exchange in the nature of commodities: "to become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of an exchange" (Marx 1971: 48 in Appadurai 1986: 8). The process through which a product becomes a commodity is very interesting in its power dynamics and knowledge definitions. To follow up the political dimension of consumption there must be awareness around processes of enclavement and diversion, which specifically show the power struggles over goods by elites and between the various agents engaged in its commoditisation. "It is in the interests of those in power to completely freeze the flow of commodities, by creating a closed universe of commodities and a rigid set of regulations about how they are to move. Yet the very nature of contests between those in power (or those who aspire to greater power) tends to invite a loosening of these rules and an expansion of the pool of commodities" (Appadurai 1986: 57). In the case of Imnet it is the Coptic Church that has the role of elite whose power is to enclave its consumption. At the same time though there are other agents engaged in the production of knowledge and the diversion from its closed predestined path. The constitution of mythologies is how Appadurai explains the knowledge relations between the various agents:

(1) Mythologies produced by traders and speculators who are largely indifferent to both the production origins and the consumption destination of commodities, except insofar as they affect fluctuation price. [...] (2) Mythologies produced by consumers (or potential consumers) alienated from the production and distribution process of key commodities. [...] And (3) mythologies produced by workers in the production process who are completely divorced from the distribution and consumption logics of the commodities they produce. (Ibid: 48)

Although his description applies to goods that have entered a structured system of production, it may apply to Imnet in the division of roles and knowledge. Those who he calls traders might be kin members in Eritrea or people practicing transnational links. It might even be that the earth has become a commodity in the same terms and that therefore there are traders who export it to Milan. Consumers will be members of the Eritrean community in Milan. The workers, in Appadurai's analysis, will be the Monks of the Coptic Monasteries in Eritrean. Although it seems inconceivable to analyse the commoditisation of Imnet in these terms, it might be interesting to understand the various games occurring around the creation and re-creation of value of the earth in terms of specialised knowledge. Primary technical knowledge in fact combines technological and cosmological layers in the production discourse and include the three contexts of interaction: market, consumer, and destination. Knowledge thus is not only related to the appropriate ways to consume the commodity, there is a distribution of knowledge at various points of the exchange process.

Moreover "the social history of things and their cultural biography are not entirely separate matters, for it is the social history of things, over the large periods of time and at large social levels, that constrains the form, meaning, and structure of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories" (ibid: 36). Simmel recalls value through this statement, which is interesting in relation to Imnet: "We call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them" (Simmel 1957: 73 quoted in Appadurai 1986: 3). Imnet from this point of view certainly has more value:

the distance and difficult trajectories, which the earth has to go through, resist in many ways its consumption and therefore increase its value when possessed. Distance though may not only affect value but also meaning, "as commodities travel greater distances (institutional, spatial, temporal), knowledge about them tends to become partial, contradictory, and differentiated" (ibid: 56).

The other theoretical approach, which can be interestingly applied, is that of the analysis of the social and cultural significance of the practice of consumption. Geissler (2000) has studied the practice of geophagy among the Luo in Kenya. He explains earth eating as a practice creating social distinctions not in terms of ethnicity but according to age, gender and class. The discursive formation around the consumption of the earth is related to status. Women and children are the only ones who are allowed to consume the earth; the status of geophagy is low. Pregnant women are the single category who can eat earth without any social consequence, though normally women may practice geophagy but might be mocked. Children may consume it, but when they reach adulthood they have to stop. Men found in the act of earth eating are dishonoured and shamed. Moreover the quality of the earth is at stake. Women know where to find the best, tastiest earth -normally close to a termites nest- and children learn when collecting it for their mothers. Wealthy women, however, buy "clean" earth from the market and serve it on special occasions. Issues around the differentiation according to the status of the various age sets and genders, and to the quality (purity) of the earth according to status, allowed Geissler to understand how the consumption of earth and its role of commodity shape and re-produce social distinctions in the same way Bourdieu (1984) has argued. The type of social distinction occurring through the consumption of Imnet might be different but it may also be closely associated. Distinctions might be related to religious affiliations, ethnicity and modernity but they may also allow insights into age and generational and gender differences.

The questions that follow this case study are many and relate to core anthropological domains of enquiry. Social distinction, consumption, belief are all analytical focuses which are dealt with in regards to identity formation and transnational movements. Its symbolologies and meanings are looked at through its related practices and experiences. The relevant discourses on the knowledge of the body, health, religion and the motherland inspire the focus on individual and collective percep-

tions. Especially the focus on the ways to experience and talk about the motherland must be one of the major issues since there certainly is a very close link with the ingestion of Imnet and the fact that it comes from "home". Imnet is not only a symbolic motherland earth but it is in its actual material substance. Here symbol and matter conflate in the act of swallowing.

### *Life histories*

Biographical data collection will be included in the research. Life history is seen here as both a method and a site. Since every site and every method provide insights into a variety of issues, the collection of biographies of individuals, their family and people closely related to them opens up a different type of analysis from the ones encountered in participant observation and case studies. The peculiarity of life histories is related to the focus on the individual subject, the diachronic nature of the data, the world of emotions permeating personal memories and experiences, and, above all, the close relationship and dialectics occurring between the researcher and the researched.

In the specific case of this research in Italy the use of life histories is very significant because of its centrality as a method in social and historical research among Italian intellectuals. In Italy, life history as a methodology for research has been widely used, in many contexts, disciplines and for different purposes. Rammstedt (1995) describes in detail the peculiarity of biographical research in Italy in its multiplicities. The objectives connected to the collection of life histories are primarily linked to the desire to let marginalized groups have a chance to speak, giving them a space in the history in which they were denied a voice. Life histories, "storie di vita", have been collected since the 1940s, although they had no place in academia until the 60s. They were at times used to fill the gaps in topical and thematic data. Anthropology and sociology used them in a complementary function added to other methodologies of research, providing further insight for theoretical frameworks and hypothesis. Later, life histories in the 70s, also presented the possibility for interdisciplinary research. Moreover biographies in Italy gave insights into context, the past through memories, and present through the description of the circumstances in which interviews were carried out. For some the narrative event was important in its linguistic significance; the narratological axis was for them the analytic framework. Others

focused on the dialectical procedure of interaction, between the researcher and the researched, but also between the micro and the macro level. There was also an attention to the self of the researcher; the description of life histories included a self-narration. The political motivation behind the collection of life history is above all significant in Italy. Marxist scholars started to do biographical research to achieve a description of “popular culture”, emphasising the importance of voices from the working class never heard before: peasants and those who were absent in the mainstream production of history. They thought of themselves as doing advocacy, empowering their researched and trying to give them equal status.

Although biographical research in Italy has a longer past than in most other Western European countries, similar issues are at stake today in the work of all those who focus on life histories (e.g. Caplan, 1997, Miller 2000 and Plummer, 2001). There are, however, different ways to use the material collected, as has been argued above through the Italian cases. My research will not produce only accounts of individual lives but will engage with these in order to achieve further insight in the particular themes and issues dealt with in the previous sections. The conceptualisation of life history as method and field of inquiry is important since it allows insight into those domains of identity difficult to investigate through collective sites. An individual’s experiences, looked through the time span of a life, provide the site for an analysis of individual and social change, and life cycles. The narratological event is mostly interesting since the act of describing oneself encompasses the sole depiction of the history of a life. The discursive and the mnemonic formation link together mixing with personal and collective narratives. So, in the analysis of life histories, the multiplicity of voices must be included also with the researchers one. While collecting the biographical data I keep a personal diary, so to record my own voice. When transcribing the interviews I want to include the subjects and try to cooperate with them to gain further access into the linguistic and experiential side of the narration. I include interviews with members of the household, I visit kin and friends in order to have a wider range of data. Finally given that, within the context of the whole research, life histories have specific roles, themes and provide specific insight, they must be included and compared with the data collected through other sites and therefore analysed in their collective as well as individual dimension.

*Access*

Access is a practicality which must not be underestimated. Life histories allow access into the intimacy of the household and of personal lives and vice versa. The learning of Tigrigna is being done through exchanges. In the past few months I have been learning with people who want to learn either Italian or English and therefore we exchange language skills. This, added to the life histories collection, gives me the personal level of communication which allows an understanding of key issues about community dynamics and to access public spaces, through some kind of snowball effect. Tigrigna learning in one-to-one meetings throughout a prolonged time span also allows access into the hidden domains of language, the field of the meaningful unsaid, and the tacit forms of communication (Pratt, 1989). Fieldwork is being carried out with the reflection on my double status of insider in the Milanese population, to which also my informants belong, and initially of outsider to their communities. Nevertheless, I try to gain as much access as possible in order to feel and be felt as an insider in many ways. The shift to the insider rather than the outsider status enters into those domains in which anthropologists in present times have diverted from the classical ideas of fieldwork among the "other", through "detached" participant observation. Reflexivity is thus crucial since not only do I need to keep track of my actions as well as my informants, but also I need to reflect on my own experiences of being a "migrant" in the UK where I study. To understand the implications of displacement and movement of my informants I must draw attention to the ways in which I have perceived "home" and myself while abroad. During the fieldwork it is usual that people want to know me through my own life experiences, often looking for similarities with their own. Reflexivity therefore is not only a politically correct practice but also it becomes a way to get to know people, to gain trust and to achieve creative relationships with informants.

*Ethics*

With the rise in tension around the status of immigrants in Italy and their "legality", this research needs to take into consideration the ethical dimension. Issues of movement and asylum seeking have become very politicised and dangerous in many ways. Many of my informants are in a fragile position in regards to the Bossi-Fini act and to the internal frictions within the Eritrean community. Therefore not only do I need to

achieve access through trust but also I must always explain to them the work in progress, its risks and empowering effects in order to receive a fully informed consent. The information that I gather is conceived as possession of my informants and therefore it's a duty to ask for permission to use it in my work. Especially in the case of life histories the ethical issues arising are higher because of the detailed and in depth nature of the information. There will be a close cooperation while transcribing the data and therefore there will be the chance to choose together whether to omit information which might end up harming my informants or me. The emotional side of this type of research needs attention since the relation with memory and pain is disrupting in most cases and for that reason it needs care and understanding. Especially in the collection of life histories there has to be a continuation of the relationship when needed, since the existence of emotional disturbance cannot be simply dismissed. The Belmont report states that the primary ethical issue is to carry out research without harming anyone. This aim is the primary concern not only in legal and political terms of but also in terms of an awareness of the human encounter with emotions and of the importance of reciprocity in the research.

### *Summary*

There are many levels in which the research gains legitimacy and significance. Anthropologically, issues of identity and perceptions of the self in relation to "communities of memory" (Malkki 1997) are here in the spotlight. After the turn in "writing against culture" (Abu Lughod 1992) and the reflexive scope of the discipline itself which previously was over-categorising communities and homogenising cultures, this research leads to a discussion of the multiplicity of voices and actions. This anthropological gaze consents to look not only at similarities but also at differences in identity formation among the same community. The concept of communities of memory is important since it allows an awareness of the impact of different experiences in the formation of identity. Theoretically, with the stress on agency, this research engages in the discussion around the relationship between structure and agency, which raises fundamental issues in the social sciences. In the Italian context, on the one hand the insight into historical memory and post-colonial reflection is useful to start a debate which has been delayed for many years. On the other hand, migration and asylum seeking are urgent issues to be

dealt with, through an insight not into the negative impacts of this phenomenon on the Italian society, but more in terms of social change. The focus on a foreign migrant community with one of the longest histories in Milan raises first of all issues around the different cultures of politics which Eritreans have experienced in Italy and in Milan. Secondly it inspires the research to look into the different communities that have been forming throughout time and to analyse the contemporary ones which may have diverse loyalties. For my informants and the Eritrean community in Milan there is also an empowering side to the research for there is space for their voices to be finally heard. Moreover my informants advise are most appreciated and cooperation is part of the methodology for fieldwork itself. Through the reflexive scope, the research should also be an account of an ethnography in which the author is actively participating with all her strengths and weaknesses.

### *Notes*

1. This is a revisited version of an MSc thesis in research methods. The paper proposes an insight inside a research in progress, these are my first few months of fieldwork: In September 2002 I started learning the Tigrinya language and gaining preliminary data and access, and since January of 2003 I have started doing multisided participant observation.
2. Amharic is the official language in Ethiopia, in Eritrea the languages most often used are Tigrigna and Arabic.
3. In Eritrea nearly half of the population follows the Christian churches, slightly more than half are Muslims and other indigenous religions also exist.
4. The race issue
5. Though not internal migrations
6. Eritrea and Ethiopia are exceptions and this is also why this research is important.
7. In "LaRepubblica" 12-07-2002
8. The PFDJ is the political party which developed from the previous EPLF liberation movement.
9. Not all branches of it: some Cardinals, like Biffi, have been stating the incommensurability of religions and cultures and therefore they have been prone to deny access to those "different" people.
10. The Coptic Crosses are different from the Catholic ones and are very often worn, especially by women, on the body or tattooed on the forehead and on arms.

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## Articles

### Biotechnology and the Society-Nature Relation

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#### *Introduction*

The emergence of biotechnology as an instrument of production in an increasingly global, information-based form of capitalism is quickly rendering the 'modern' boundary between society and nature obsolete. The impetus for this emergence was the advent of recombinant DNA in the early 1970s, a technique used to splice together the genetic material from dissimilar species in order that new, transgenic organisms might be 'persuaded' to produce proteins not otherwise 'found' in nature. This unprecedented control over the reproductive capacities of life at the molecular level distinguishes 'new' from 'old' biotechnology<sup>1</sup> and has allowed for the employment of living things as 'self-replicating factories' (King 1997) for the production of foods, pharmaceuticals, and even building materials.<sup>2</sup> Aimed at manipulating the reproductive capacities of living things at the molecular level, biotechnology 're-programs' the natural world so that its 'design' might better serve social needs. Thus, perhaps more than any other, *biotechnologies* challenge traditional conceptions of nature, society, and what it means to be human.

Despite their increasing interest in biotechnology as an instrument of production political economists have paid relatively scant attention to the unique implications of the technology for the society-nature relation. They have tended to focus instead on the social relations and interests shaping the development of biotechnology and, in particular, issues surrounding its unequal distribution. This is perhaps reflective of the long-standing concern amongst political economists with dispelling the notion that technology is an autonomous, inherently progressive force of social change. And indeed, the work of Yoxen (1983), Kenney (1986), and

Krimsky (1991), among others, has gone a long way toward revealing the social relations and processes obscured by the 'rhetoric of the technological sublime' (L. Marx, 1964; Nye, 1994) currently surrounding developments in biotechnology. Nevertheless, the absence of a concern in this literature with the implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation is both theoretically and politically troubling. Not only does it constitute a theoretical gap in the approach, but it also risks political irrelevance inasmuch as many of the social movements mobilizing in opposition to biotechnology are concerned with just these implications (Shiva, 1995).

To be sure, discussions of nature are not absent from political economy more generally. In response to concerns over environmental degradation that have arisen since the 1960s there have been a number of attempts to incorporate 'ecological' issues into the corpus of political economy.<sup>3</sup> The eco-Marxism of O'Connor (1998) and others redresses the neglect of 'nature' in a discipline that has focused its critical attention, for the most part, on capitalism as a set of social relations whose internal contradictions manifest in a series of crises and eventual social transformation. Central to the work of eco-Marxists is the notion of a 'second contradiction of capitalism'; namely, that which exists between a relentless drive to accumulate and the 'natural' limits to this accumulation posed by the environment. Relatively absent from this work, however, is a sensitivity to the role of technological change in transforming the society-nature relation. In fact, most 'ecological thought' tends merely to reinscribe a modern society/nature dualism insofar as its emphasis remains on the tendency for capital accumulation to 'disobey' natural laws and deny nature its 'relative autonomy' (Castree, 2000). To the degree that biotechnology is considered at all here, it is primarily conceived as a 'degradation' of nature in the interests of capital accumulation. In the end, the politics implicit in an eco-Marxist analysis is one focused on saving 'nature' from capitalism.

How might political economy theorize the implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation so as to foster effective biopolitical imaginaries without appealing to such 'modern' society/nature dualisms?

This paper suggests the value to a political economy of biotechnology of two 'amodern' traditions in contemporary social theory. I argue that both the 'production of nature thesis' and 'artifactual constructiv-

ism' provide useful conceptual tools for grasping the unique implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation, and therefore have the potential to enrich a political economy of biotechnology. I deal first with the production of nature thesis, central to which is the argument that 'nature' in a capitalist society, rather than violated by the drive to capital accumulation, is in fact itself increasingly produced as a commodity in the interests of accumulation. In this sense, biotechnology can be effectively conceived as the latest tool in the progressive production of nature as a commodity, one that projects the struggles and contradictions of capitalism into the very genetic structure of the world. However, while the PNT is effective in locating biotechnology within the historical development of capitalism as a mode of production, it is less effective in clarifying what is unique about biotechnology in this regard. In the second part of the paper I suggest that this limitation is reflective of a tendency to abstract from the concrete practices internal to the labour process through which the society-nature relation is constituted. In the final part of the paper I demonstrate the value of the 'artifactual constructivism' of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway for redressing this limitation of the PNT. I conclude that both these traditions in social theory will prove indispensable to a political economy of biotechnology and a global biopolitics.

### *Biotechnology and the Production of Nature Thesis*

Central to the production of nature thesis is a critique of the 'modern', dualistic assumption that the social and natural worlds are ontologically distinct. For Neil Smith (1984), whose *Uneven Development* is the seminal statement of the thesis, the notion that there exists a natural world independent of the forms of its social appropriation is both logically and empirically spurious (see also Braun and Castree 1998). On the one hand, such a position is logically contradictory insofar as "the very act of positing nature requires entering into a certain relation with nature" (Smith, 1984:18). On the other hand, the notion of a pristine, asocial nature is everywhere empirically contradicted by the concrete life-activity of human beings as they strive to meet their needs through transforming the world around them. The society-nature relation is always already social, then, both in the sense that human beings can only know 'nature' through particular social categories, and in the more literal sense that human beings only ever exist in a world that is in some way shaped

by their own transformative activity. Taking this critique of 'modern' society-nature dualisms as a point of departure, the PNT aims at uncovering the specific socio-historical conditions under which nature is produced as a social reality.

An emphasis on nature as a social product enables Smith and those who have followed in this tradition to identify and theorize a specifically capitalist form of the society-nature relation. While multiple forms of social appropriation may have characterized the production of nature in pre-capitalist modes of production, with the ascendance of capitalism the production of nature as a commodity comes to dominate all others. The unprecedented penetration of the natural world by the commodity form facilitated by the technical developments spurred by inter-capitalist competition, and the spread of this process across the globe, have literally allowed capital to remake 'nature' in its own image.<sup>4</sup> These processes of intensive and extensive commodification have in turn served to perpetuate capitalist social relations through a progressive subordination of productive activity to a system of wage-labour and exchange. And insofar as 'nature' is produced as a commodity, the society-nature relation under capitalism becomes characterized by the same fetishism that attaches itself to other products of alienated labour.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in locating the current society-nature relation within the socio-historical conditions of the capitalist mode of production, Smith uncovers an 'ideology of nature' reflective of the alienation endemic to a generalized system of commodity production. While alienation from nature is surely not specific to capitalism, the extent to which it is fostered by a system of wage-labour and exchange makes for a unique society-nature relation under capitalism.

The argument that the contemporary society-nature relation is one conditioned by the ascendancy of capitalist commodity production should be particularly appealing to political economists for whom the concept of 'nature' has long remained illusive. The society/nature dualism so pervasive in 'modern' thought has had a particularly strong hold on political economy. The natural world has generally been taken for granted as a collection of raw materials that, while (ab)used in different ways depending on the mode of production, is itself socially neutral. The result has been a general reluctance to enter into discussions of nature inasmuch as it has been deemed the sphere of the natural sciences. However, if nature, in both its material and discursive constitution, increas-

ingly takes the form of a commodity, then the tools of political economy become particularly relevant to any such discussion. Nature in this case, rather than external to the contradictions and struggles endemic to capitalism, is intimately bound up with them, a product of alienated labour that is increasingly revealed as such through the processes of intensive and extensive commodification. Thus, the production of nature thesis opens the theoretical space for what has heretofore seemed an oxymoron – a political economy of nature.<sup>6</sup>

Such theoretical space would seem especially vital if political economy is to grasp the significance of biotechnology as an instrument of production. The capacity to manipulate the reproductive capacities of living things at the molecular level, primarily through the technique of recombinant DNA, has allowed for an unprecedented penetration of 'nature' by the commodity form. Whereas previous technologies have been used to break down and re-shape a 'natural' raw material, biotechnology 'programs' living things themselves in the interests of 'designing' a world better suited to meet human needs. Every day, species boundaries are transgressed and organisms genetically engineered to produce nature as a commodity. Never has nature confronted human beings in so artifactual a form, thus revealing its status as a social product more than ever before. The production of nature thesis, with its emphasis on the process whereby nature comes to be constituted as a social reality would seem ideal for grasping the significance of these technological developments.

Of course these are not merely 'technical' achievements, but have taken place largely within the context of an increasing subordination of science and technology to capitalist relations of production (Levidow and Young 1981, 1984; Noble 1977, 1984), and so the biotechnological production of nature is in turn increasingly serving to perpetuate these relations. Its origins in the struggle of firms to overcome the limitations of an advanced Fordist form of the labour process, the intensive and extensive commodification facilitated by biotechnology is opening up new spaces for accumulation (Kenney 1999). The potential for both the replacement of old methods of production and the creation of new, previously unimaginable products through genetic engineering techniques has given impetus to the current proliferation and growth of biotechnology firms and their inter-linkages with both government and academic research facilities. The rapid emergence of this 'university-industrial

complex' (Kenney 1984) in biotechnology is testament to the degree to which the production of nature under capitalism is both shaped by and in turn serves to perpetuate the dominant form of property relations.

And this subordination of the biotechnological production of nature to the interests of capital accumulation is given expression in the ideology of nature dominant in western capitalist societies. While it may indeed be the case that the emergence of biotechnology reveals the social production of nature to an unprecedented degree, the alienation from this nature endemic in a system of generalized commodity production is reflected in the current desire for either a 'return to' or an 'escape from' nature. Critics of the contemporary society-nature relation often condemn 'humanity' for their transgressions against 'nature' and see biotechnology as merely the latest tool in the assault on the natural world. On the other hand, those in favour of the technology often view it as a final leap forward in the historical struggle of 'humanity' to liberate itself from the vicissitudes of a natural existence.<sup>7</sup> In both cases 'nature' is conceived of as 'other' than 'humanity' rather than as itself a social product, a dualism indicative of the alienation from nature perpetuated by the process of capitalist commodity production.

The production of nature thesis, however, opens up the theoretical space necessary for grasping the implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation without relying on any such dualism. In opposition to those who would suggest that biotechnology is 'liberating' human beings from nature, a logical and empirical absurdity, biotechnology can be effectively viewed as the newest tool in the capitalist production of nature as a commodity. As such, rather than transcending nature, biotechnology intensifies and extends the human relationship with the rest of nature insofar as the contradictions of the commodity form penetrate to the molecular building blocks of life and spread over the entire globe.

This process is not, however, a 'transgression' of a once pristine nature; indeed, such an interpretation is not only logically and empirically problematic, but unnecessary to grasp the significance of biotechnology as an instrument of production. While it may be the case that certain constructivist tendencies in the social sciences have resulted in a reduction of nature to epiphenomenal status, the notion that nature is always already social does not necessarily imply that nature is a mere shadow of the social, a discursive or cultural construct determined by

particular power configurations. The notion of 'production', rather than 'construction', emphasizes the degree to which nature is produced through concrete human praxis that is indeed always social, but nonetheless 'real' for all that. Accepting that nature is socially produced as a commodity, therefore, by no means precludes consideration of 'natural laws' or 'ecological concerns'; afterall, a commodity is not only an object of social exchange, but a determinate use-value created through a 'mastery' of these very 'laws', albeit often without due attention to 'ecological concerns'. What the PNT does preclude, however, is any attempt to distinguish 'natural laws' from the social processes through which they become manifest. In short, nature is always already social, and it is only by virtue of this very fact that it can have any 'reality' for us at all.

The PNT therefore demands a fundamental shift of perspective, but one that is necessary if critical biopolitics is to avoid relying on futile, and ultimately conservative, appeals to an immediate nature that somehow 'exists' independently of the various historical forms of its production. While Smith is sensitive to the fact that depriving nature of any distinct ontological status may appear politically debilitating to environmentalists, he effectively counters such criticism by pointing to the tacit conservatism of those critiques that promulgate a 'return to nature'. Such an approach inevitably involves a condemnation of productive activity *per se*, thereby diverting attention from the critique and possible transformation of those social relations and processes that determine the form this activity takes.

However, if nature is always already socially produced, then the goal of an effective environmental politics is not a 'return to nature', or even a 'liberation of nature', but the creation of a world conducive to better ways of producing nature. "The first question, is not whether or to what extent nature is controlled," Smith suggests, but "how we produce nature and who controls this production of nature"(1984: 63). Biotechnology in this view is best conceived not as an instrument for dominating an otherwise autonomous (even relatively) nature, but as an instrument for producing nature as a commodity in the interests of capital accumulation. The PNT can infuse critical biopolitics, then, through locating the development of biotechnology and its implications for the society-nature relation within the historical development of capitalism as a mode of production. Such politics would have a clear affinity with the oppositional movements currently coalescing around the globalization of capi-

tal insofar as creating a better society-nature relation would require, rather than some kind of moratorium on biotechnology to protect nature, a fundamental transformation of the social relations and processes within which the biotechnological production of nature takes place.

Thus, in refusing recourse to a society/nature dualism, the PNT provides an indispensable starting point for a political economy of biotechnology and the development of a critical biopolitics. Biotechnology can be effectively conceptualized as an instrument of production in a capitalist labour process that intensifies and extends the process of commodification through manipulating the genetic structure of living things, thereby perpetuating capitalist class relations and reinforcing the 'ideology of nature' through the further alienation of labour from 'nature'. Yet, while it is indeed important for a biopolitics to locate biotechnology within the relatively continuous process whereby the natural world has been penetrated by the commodity form, it is equally important to grasp the important qualitative changes that this process has undergone in recent years. In the following section I suggest that despite its strengths, the level of abstraction at which the PNT is posited serves to obscure important changes in the way nature is produced within the historical development of capitalism, the latest of which is largely an effect of the emergence of biotechnology as an instrument of production.

### *The Labour Process and the Practice of Producing Nature*

In identifying a specifically capitalist form of the society-nature relation, the PNT draws attention to the important role that the labour process plays in producing 'nature'. While human beings have always met their needs through transforming their world with various tools, in a capitalist mode of production this process takes a particular form by virtue of its subordination to the interests of capital accumulation. A central characteristic of this capitalist form of the labour process is a near continuous revolution of the means of production as capital, under the compulsion of inter-firm competition, seeks to intensify and extend the process of commodification. With the increasing incorporation of science and technology into the capitalist labour process comes the increased penetration of the natural world by the commodity form, a further entrenchment of capitalist social relations and an unprecedented alienation from nature. A focus on the capitalist labour process as the primary site at which the society-nature is constituted is not, therefore, reflective of a narrow eco-

conomic reductionism in the PNT, but of the very real tendency under capitalism for commodity production to dominate all other ways of relating to nature.

However, while the PNT may point to the importance of the labour process in making concrete the society-nature relation under capitalism, its consideration of the labour process itself remains at a particularly high level of abstraction. For the most part, Smith remains content with a rather functional view of the labour process from the 'outside'; that is, the capitalist labour process is assumed to be functional for constituting a particular society-nature relation because it is subordinated to capitalist social relations. Relatively absent is any serious consideration of the concrete practices internal to the labour process through which the society-nature relation is actually constituted. This is not to say of course that the subordination of the labour process to capitalist commodity production is not a significant determinant of its form, nor is it to take away from the value of this insight for understanding the contemporary society-nature relation. It is merely to suggest that in abstracting from the concrete practices internal to the labour process, the PNT fails to adequately account for the precise means by which this relation comes to be a reality 'for us'.

This level of abstraction poses certain obstacles to grasping the significance of biotechnology for the society-nature relation insofar as it obscures the significant changes the labour process has undergone throughout the development of capitalism. While it is indeed the case that this labour process is subordinated to the interests of capital accumulation, and therefore shaped by a certain 'logic of capitalist development', this by no means precludes the possibility of it taking distinct forms. Marx (1976) was especially sensitive to the importance of qualitative changes in the labour process in his account of the transition from a system of manufacture to one of large-scale industry during his lifetime, but subsequent transitions to Fordist, advanced Fordist, and now post-Fordist forms of the labour process can likewise be discerned. It seems clear that these changes in the practices through which nature is transformed to meet human needs would have had, and continue to have, significant implications for the society-nature relation, an understanding of which would be integral to the formation of an effective oppositional politics. Yet, in abstracting from the practices internal to the labour process and the important changes these have undergone, the PNT must

remain content with the, albeit important, insight that capitalism produces nature as a commodity thereby perpetuating capitalist social relations.

This level of abstraction is particularly debilitating for a political economy of biotechnology inasmuch as biotechnology has emerged within the context of the current shift to a post-Fordist, informational form of the labour process. Since the early 1970s, western capitalist economies have been undergoing a process of restructuring at the heart of which has been the development of a new form of the labour process whose focus is the storage, transmission, manipulation, and application of information. Biotechnology is implicated in this 'information revolution' as it has both benefited from developments in microelectronics and is in turn converging with them in the form of biochips, molecular computers and other 'bioinformatic' devices (Rifkin, 1998: 175). These developments have led some to include biotechnology as itself an information technology (Castells 1996; Schiller 1996), and others to suggest that biotechnology is on the verge of subsuming these other technologies and serving as the technical foundation for yet another form of capitalism (Rifkin 1998). As the primary site at which the production of nature takes place, grasping these changes in the labour process would seem imperative to understanding the contemporary society-nature relation.

And indeed, the shift to an informational labour process has witnessed the emergence of a very different form of 'nature'. Developments in information technologies have facilitated a fundamental change in the practices internal to the labour process through which nature is produced as a commodity. Whereas in previous forms of the labour process 'physical labour' was applied at the point of production in order to re-shape a material found in 'nature', productive activity in this new form of the labour process increasingly takes the form of 'mental labour' focused on the reduction and recombination of these materials in their elemental forms through the use of computer-based technologies. Biotechnology is the most extreme example of this phenomenon in that it reduces living organisms to their genetic information and recombines this information to produce new organisms as commodities. Thus, while as an instrument of production in a capitalist form of the labour process biotechnology certainly produces nature as a commodity, it produces a very specific kind of commodity that reflects the interests of capital in its very genetic structure. The PNT, however, in remaining at a particularly high level of

abstraction, is inadequate to conceptualize these developments and their implications for the society-nature relation.

And not only does the nature pole of this relation taken on a very specific form with the emergence of biotechnology as an information technology, but the society pole is transformed along with it. The transition to an informational form of the labour process has taken place largely within the context of the struggle of capital to transcend the obstacles to accumulation posed by the nation-state. Information technologies are facilitating the transition to 'global capitalism' insofar as they provide capitalist firms with unprecedented flexibility (Hassan 1999; Teeple, 2000). Biotechnology figures in this process in a number of ways, a most significant of which is that it increasingly liberates commodity production from a reliance on raw materials and forms of labour that may be geographically specific. The increasing subordination of more traditional forms of agricultural production to a transnational agro-industrial complex, for example, has to a great degree been facilitated by developments in biotechnology (Kloppenber, 1998). Thus, biotechnology is not only implicated in the production of a new form of nature, but also in the production of a new form of society in which capitalist social relations have become global, subsuming an unprecedented portion of the world's productive activity. These important changes in the society pole of the society-nature relation fly under the radar of the PNT insofar as it tends to embrace a rather monolithic conception of capitalist social relations that are merely perpetuated by the production of nature as a commodity.

Similarly, significant changes in the contemporary 'ideology of nature' tend to be obscured by the level of abstraction at which the PNT is posited. Concomitant with the shift to an information-based form of the labour process has been the emergence of a very different view of nature. Whereas nature has traditionally been conceived of as an obdurate object, something to be 'tamed, squeezed, molded, and shaped', more recently there has been a shift to a view of nature as a flow of information that can be stored, manipulated, and transmitted (Keller, 1995; Rifkin 1998). Nature here is not so much an object to be subordinated to the human will, as a 'program' to be 'designed' so that it better serves human purposes. While this view of nature may indeed be 'ideological' in the sense that it still reflects the alienation wrought by generalized commodity production, it is clearly a unique form of this ideology that expresses the contradictions of this production in new ways.

Remaining at the level of an 'ideology of nature' reflective of the production of nature within capitalist social relations is inadequate to get at these important changes in the way nature is being experienced and perceived in the era of biotechnology; moreover, such abstraction obscures any progressive political imaginaries that may be implicit in these changing experiences and perceptions.

A sensitivity to these fundamental changes to the society-nature relation and the 'ideology of nature' concomitant with the shift to an informational form of the capitalist labour process is necessary if political economy is to grasp the significance of biotechnology and contribute to an effective critical biopolitics. While locating the technology within the historical 'logic of capitalism' is an important first step toward theorizing the implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation, it is equally important to understand this development within the context of the qualitative shift that has occurred in the capitalist labour process since the early 1970s. Biotechnology is a central means of production in a novel form of the labour process through which nature is being produced as an 'information commodity', society as 'global capitalism', and nature as 'design'. A critical political economy of biotechnology must strive to understand these changes in the processes, relations and ideologies of capitalism so that it might contribute to the struggle for their transformation.

Of course many of these shifts are still in their nascent stages and the point here has not been to delineate them in any detail; rather, the goal has been to suggest that the level of abstraction at which the PNT is posited tends to obscure them, making it inadequate as it stands for fully grasping the unique implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation. What is required as a supplement to the PNT is a theoretical framework that, while likewise concerned with the processes through which nature comes to be constituted as a social reality, places more emphasis on the actual practices through which the society-nature relation is achieved and maintained. In the final part of the paper I suggest the value of the tradition of artifactual constructivism in this regard.

### *Artifactual Constructivism and Biotechnology*

Like the production of nature thesis, artifactual constructivism (AC) (Demeritt 1998) takes as its point of departure a critique of the society/nature dualism at the heart of modern thought. The work of Bruno

Latour (1991) and Donna Haraway (1984, 1997), in subtly different but complementary ways, challenges the foundational status of 'nature', focusing instead on the complex processes through which it becomes constituted as a reality. Their work shares with the PNT a concern not only with understanding the ways in which nature comes to be conceived as such, but with the processes through which a 'natural world' is actually produced, or 'constructed', as a material object that is always 'social', but nonetheless 'real'. Indeed, central to the tradition of artifactual constructivism is a critique of these very distinctions insofar as they are considered politically dubious and obstacles to the pursuit of 'situated' knowledge. Like the PNT, artifactual constructivism demonstrates how nature is always already social by delineating the processes through which it becomes produced as both an epistemological category and an 'objective reality'.

The two traditions differ considerably, however, in their conceptualization of these processes. While the PNT remains content with an analysis of the labour process at a particularly high level of abstraction, AC focuses on the more concrete, everyday practices through which the society-nature relation is constituted. Of specific interest are the material-discursive practices of 'technoscience', a term intended to convey the degree to which science, rather than a value-neutral pursuit of 'truth', is itself a cultural practice located within a certain power structure and infused with particular norms, values, and interests. For Haraway, the term also suggests the historical 'implosion' of science and technology that has rendered traditional distinctions between science as the pursuit of disinterested knowledge, and technology as the 'social' application of that knowledge, meaningless (1997: 68). The products of technoscience, rather than 'natural', 'objective truths' that somehow exist independently of 'society' or 'culture', are 'hybrids', or mixtures of the "technical, textual, organic, historical, formal, mythic, economic and political dimensions of entities, actions, and worlds." AC traces the complex 'networks' of technoscientific practice from which these hybrids emerge, and attempts to determine how and why certain of their characteristics come to be deemed 'natural', and others 'social'.

This analytical focus on the material-discursive practices of technoscience is reflected in a sensitivity to the important changes in the society-nature relation that have occurred since the early 1970s. While the emphasis on commodification in the PNT tends to obscure these changes

by reducing the production of nature to the 'logic of capitalism', the notion of 'hybridization' in AC illuminates the degree to which the concept of 'nature' has become truly problematic of late. For AC, the world is and always has been composed of a complex network of humans and non-humans whose 'social' and 'natural' attributes are thoroughly 'mixed-up'; in short, we inhabit a world that is constructed through a set of material-discursive practices. The world is thus constituted by 'hybrids' and only becomes divided into 'nature' and 'society' through a process of negotiation and regulation, what Latour calls 'purification'.

Throughout the 'modern' period the networks of humans and non-humans were relatively limited and the process of hybridization was easily rendered invisible by the 'modern constitution';<sup>8</sup> however, an unprecedented proliferation of hybrids made possible by recent technoscientific transformations in the information and biological science has increasingly revealed the futility of any attempt to draw a static, ahistorical boundary around 'nature'. Everything from thinking machines, to frozen embryos, to mice designed to develop cancer challenge our conception of what counts as natural. Of course science and technology have always been about 'hybridization', hence Latour's argument that 'we have never been modern'; however, with the proliferation of hybrids since the early 1970s, this process has become much more explicit, refusing containment within a simple society/nature dualism.

Rather than merely dissolving 'nature' into a 'social' category, however, AC is sensitive to the degree to which an unprecedented proliferation of hybrids has effected a simultaneous transformation of 'society'. While the PNT does recognize the degree to which the production of nature as a commodity perpetuates capitalist social relations, these relations remain, for the most part, the 'social' context within which the production of 'nature' takes place. To use Latour's language, the PNT does not fully embrace the 'second principle of symmetry', which requires that the 'social' be explained with reference to the same material-discursive practices through which 'nature' is produced. As Latour suggests, a truly 'symmetrical' constructivism must strive to understand the ways in which the technoscientific construction of 'nature' is simultaneously a construction of 'society'; that 'society', rather than a foundation, is itself produced and maintained through material-discursive practice. The recent shifts in technoscience have thus rendered the notion of 'society' as problematic as that of 'nature' insofar as the proliferation of hybrids

has revealed the degree to which 'society' resides in and is literally held together by 'things'. Of course societies have always been produced through material-discursive practice; but again, with recent technoscientific transformations this has become much more explicit, further rendering a modern society/nature dualism ineffectual to grasp the society-nature relation.

Finally, an emphasis on the discursive dimension of the practices of technoscience makes AC more sensitive than the PNT to the important changes in the way nature is being experienced and perceived with the unprecedented proliferation of hybrids. Rather than assuming an 'ideology of nature' reflective of the commodification of nature within the context of capitalist social relations, AC is more concerned with the role that experiences and perceptions of nature play in determining what counts as 'social' and 'natural' in the first place. At the same time as the proliferation of hybrids has revealed the degree to which 'societies' and 'natures', rather than ontological categories, are themselves the products of technoscientific practice, it has revealed these practices to be as much 'discursive' as 'material'.<sup>9</sup> It has become increasingly apparent that developments in technoscience are to a great degree fostered by experiences, understandings, and normative claims regarding society, nature, and what it means to be human. Current developments in information and biological sciences are being facilitated by a novel discourse that dissolves 'nature' and 'society' into a flow of information and foresees human beings transcending their 'natural' existence in a future without contradiction and struggle (Silver 1997). An emphasis on technoscience as a set of concrete, material-discursive practices thus brings into focus important changes in nature, society and discourse that remain relatively obscured in the PNT.

When situated within the context of these shifting technoscientific practices, biotechnology takes on new significance. As a central component of these practices, biotechnology has been integral to the unprecedented proliferation of hybrids that has rendered modern conceptions of society and nature so problematic. An unprecedented manipulation of the reproductive capacities of living things at the molecular level constitutes a qualitative leap forward in the process of 'hybridization'. Genetically engineered organisms are designed in their very molecular structure, thereby making any *a priori* attempt to identify their 'natural' component, as opposed to their 'social' one, futile. These organisms thus

also reveal the degree to which 'society', rather than the context within which things are produced, literally resides in, and is held together by, these 'things'; in short, the degree to which in producing nature we simultaneously produce ourselves. And never before has the discursive dimension of technoscientific practice been more visible than in the case of biotechnology. Rather than an obdurate object standing opposed to 'society', nature is viewed as entirely reducible to a genetic code that can be stored, manipulated, and transmitted at the whim of the molecular biologist. Locating biotechnology within the technoscientific practices of hybridization thus bring to light its unique role in revealing the degree to which 'society' and 'nature', and the distinction between them, are products of material-discursive practice.

An analytical sensitivity to role that biotechnology is playing in these current shifts in technoscientific practice raises some interesting possibilities for a biopolitics. Whereas the PNT locates the potential for alternative productions of nature within a wider transformation of capitalist social relations, AC advances a more 'micro' politics of responsibility. In revealing the degree to which the boundary between society and nature is produced and maintained through the concrete, material-discursive practices of technoscience, AC suggests the potential for a more responsible, self-conscious form of these practices. Of course there is no outline for a 'better' society-nature relation provided, and this lack of normative direction is a strength of the argument insofar as any such normative claims would inevitably involve an appeal to the kind of society/nature dualism that has proven so problematic. Appeals to the universality of either pole of this relation to justify a particular production of the other are as politically dubious as they are logically inconsistent; they obscure the degree to which both 'society' and 'nature' are always already infused with material-discursive practice and therefore inherently political. A biopolitics, rather than focusing on keeping the two separate – a futile endeavour from the outset – should concern itself with encouraging a more responsible, self-conscious production of hybrids. Biotechnology, in facilitating an unprecedented proliferation of these hybrids, reveals the need for such a politics of responsibility more than ever before. Thus, in focusing on the material-discursive practices through which the society-nature relation is constituted, AC points to biopolitical possibilities of more immediate relevance than simply 'waiting for the revolution'.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, a 'politics of responsibility' is bound to appear rather thin to those confronted with the structural constraints imposed by an increasingly global, information-based form of capitalism; and indeed, the analytical approach of AC has certain limitations that must be addressed if it is to be useful for a political economy of biotechnology and a global, biopolitics. Primary in this regard is AC's tendency to abstract technoscientific practice within the 'lab' from wider political economic relations and processes. While it is indeed the case that changing technoscientific practices since the 1970s have had important implications for the society-nature relation, these changing practices must be located within the context of a shift to a new global, information-based form of capitalism. A driving force behind this shift has been an increased subordination of science and technology to the requirements of capital accumulation, an historical process that has received surprisingly little attention in the AC literature. A focus on the 'lab' as the primary site at which 'worlds are made', while effectively directing attention to the material-discursive practices through which the society-nature relation is constituted, tends to obscure the degree to which the 'lab' has itself become incorporated into the capitalist labour process. As a central component in the shift in technoscientific practices since the 1970s, the development of biotechnology has been shaped by this process of incorporation and as an instrument of production reflects the requirements of accumulation in both its form and function. The implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation cannot be grasped independently of these developments.

Nevertheless, a focus on the material-discursive practices through which the society-nature relation is constituted, if conceived within the context of an increasing subordination of science and technology to the capitalist labour process, can provide for a nuanced and penetrating political economy of biotechnology that avoids recourse to a simple society/nature dualism. First, it allows for an appreciation of the unique role being played by biotechnology in producing nature as a material-discursive reality, while not losing sight of the process of commodification as the driving force behind its development. Second, it directs attention to the ways in which biotechnology, as a central component in the shifting material-discursive practices internal to the labour process, is producing a new form of society, while still maintaining a focus on capitalism as the primary structuring dynamic of contemporary life. Finally,

such a focus on the material-discursive practices internal to the capitalist labour process would allow for a greater sensitivity to the more subtle changes in the way the society-nature relation is being experienced and perceived without losing sight of the wider ideological context within which these more subtle changes are occurring. In short, such an approach would enable political economy to grasp the unique implications of biotechnology for the society-nature relation within the context of capitalist development, without recourse to a simple society/nature dualism.

Such an approach to the political economy of biotechnology can likewise infuse a global biopolitics that, while sensitive to the unique threats of biotechnology, refuses to rely on illogical and inherently conservative appeals to a 'nature' distinct from the various forms of its social appropriation. The primary threat of biotechnology lies in its unprecedented intensification and extension of the process of commodification, its role in the globalization of capitalist social relations, and in the ideological reduction of the world to a flow of information subordinated to the will of the molecular biologist. This is not of course to say that the 'environmental' threats of biotechnology are unimportant. The important point to be made, however, is that these 'environmental threats' cannot be conceived in abstraction from the current shift in the material-discursive practices through which the society-nature relation is constituted. Research and development in genetic engineering is driven more by the profit motive than by any hubristic attempt by science to 'dominate' or 'control' nature. While commodification may not be the only process shaping the biotechnological production of nature, the degree to which science and technological development have become subordinated to the interests of capital surely makes it the dominant one, and increasingly the only politically relevant one. A politics aimed at combating the threats posed by biotechnology, rather than protecting 'nature' from biotechnology, must focus its attention on encouraging those material-discursive practices that might foster a responsible and self-conscious employment of biotechnology to produce more human(e) forms of nature and society. Insofar as the social relations and processes of capitalism systematically impede the pursuit of such practices, they must be the object of critique and transformation.

**Notes**

1. Notwithstanding attempts by industry and government to depict current biotechnological developments as continuous with those in the past (e.g. Canadian Biotechnology Strategy Secretariat (1998)), this distinction is well established in more critical analyses (e.g. Kenney (1984)). For the remainder of the discussion here the term 'biotechnology' refers to these developments in 'new' biotechnology.
2. An illustrative example of this 'transgenic production' is the creation of spider-goat hybrids whose 'milk' contains the protein for spider silk that can be used as a stronger and lighter replacement for steel. See [www.nexia.com](http://www.nexia.com).
3. Many of these attempts can be found in the pages of the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*.
4. As Smith argues: "No part of the earth's surface, the atmosphere, the oceans, the geological substratum or the biological superstratum are immune from transformation by capital. In the form of a price tag, every use-value is delivered an invitation to the labor process, and capital – by its nature the quintessential socialite – is driven to make good on every invitation" (1984: 56).
5. Hence we see the paradoxical emergence of a 'return to nature' movement at the very moment when such a 'nature' is most in doubt. See also Vogel, 1988
6. MacNaghten and Urry (1995) have called for the development of a 'sociology of nature'. A political economy of nature would be one that while emphasizing the 'sociality of nature' emphasizes the materiality of the process of its production within the relations and processes of capitalism.
7. Most of the more popular debate over biotechnology has concerned issues of food and human genetic engineering. Examples of condemnation can be found in Tokar (2001). Praise for biotechnology, particularly as it relates to human genetic engineering, can be found in Silver (1997). For an accessible and somewhat more critical discussion of the popular discourse surrounding developments in biotechnology, see Rifkin (1998).
8. For an explanation of the role of the 'modern constitution' in rendering hybrids invisible, thereby allowing for their proliferation, see Latour (1991).
9. This of course raises the issue of whether the distinction between the two is useful at all. I assume that Haraway's use of the hyphenated 'material-discursive', like her many other hyphenated and 'imploded' terms, is intended as a refutation of a 'vulgar' materialism. Even a cursory glance at the "Theses on Feuerbach", however, would suggest that Marx's materialism was always 'discursive' insofar as "the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism is that the thing, reality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively"(Marx 1970: 121).

10. While an exploration of the specific 'content' of this biopolitics is beyond the scope of this discussion, democratization of technoscience policy, greater public control over the research generated in university and government labs, greater professional autonomy amongst scientists at the point of production (e.g. through unions or professional organizations), and greater cooperation between the 'developed' and 'developing' world in the development and employment of biotechnology, among others, would be key components.

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*Alternate Routes*

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## **The Changing Configurations of Inequality in Post-industrial Society: Volunteering as a Case Study<sup>1</sup>**

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The following paper brings together an empirical and theoretical investigation of humanitarian volunteer work and the post-industrial political condition. As a study of volunteers who work in inner-urban Melbourne, Australia, providing food, clothing, referrals and support on a 'food bus' for homeless youth, it addresses the basic question of what motivates and sustains their commitment. In doing so, the paper also investigates the interrelationship between humanitarian volunteer work and the processes of structural adjustment that have redefined the responsibilities of the state with regard to issues like poverty and homelessness.

The primary aim of the paper is not to chart the historical relationship between volunteering and the welfare state *per se*, but to consider, more generally, the significance of humanitarian volunteer work in the contemporary social world. In *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (1999), French sociologist Luc Boltanski points out that an increasing number of Non-Governmental Organizations have begun to fill in for lacking essential services in many poorer parts of the world. In the process, he observes, they have incited intense debate around the purpose and efficacy of their actions. He suggests that this is because the emergence of a "nascent humanitarian movement" since the 1970s plays on two tensions in contemporary Western societies. The first is between communitarianism and abstract universalism and the second lies at the heart of our "culture of authenticity," wherein humanitarianism seems the ideal means to cultivate a moral self through absorption in one's own pity at the spectacle of an other's suffering.

Boltanski goes on to unearth the foundations of humanitarian ideology and to explore contemporary humanitarian action without, he writes, "falling into either a smug celebration of the return to kindness or an easy denunciation of the perverse spectator" (xiv). Following Boltanski's

cue, this paper seeks to challenge both romantic celebrations of volunteering as well as cynical charges that volunteers are essentially self-satisfied "do-gooders." It also confronts the proposition advanced by political analysts of "social decapitalisation," taken up recently by governments in Australia and elsewhere, that voluntary associations strengthen collaborative engagement in political life.

The volunteers whose narrative accounts make up the body of the case study are represented here as they describe themselves, as everyday people trying to assist a particularly socially and economically marginalised population. At the same time, the interview material below reveals their obvious powerlessness to alleviate the kinds of problems, like homelessness and drug addiction, that working on the food bus exposes them to. Most also hold out very little hope that these problems can or will be redressed by governments or community welfare organizations in the conceivable future. Those who took part in the study continued to work toward their stated aim to help street kids while at the same time they claimed that nothing they do makes a visible difference in this regard.

The question then, that underlies this paper on both a practical and theoretical level, is what motivates and sustains a commitment of this kind? I pose this question in a particular social context, a context that volunteers themselves characterise by increasing social suffering and growing uncertainty that anything can be done to change it. The following attempts to make sense of volunteers' enduring commitment to the food bus by analysing the terms in which poverty is framed in post-industrial welfare states. It also considers whether volunteer work can be explained according to the prevalent logic that it strengthens one's sense of place and purpose in "the community."

Ultimately, this paper explores the possibility that humanitarian volunteer work is, instead, a response to increasingly polarised social and economic inequality. I propose that volunteering takes on a particular meaning in the post-industrial social world as a medium through which people can witness and make sense of lived experiences far removed from their own. The following argues that volunteers continue to work on the food bus, despite its shortcomings, primarily because it allows them to encounter those who share the same city, but few of the same opportunities and luxuries. I conclude that in the context of restructured welfare states like Australia, humanitarian volunteer work marks a par-

ticular and increasing response to the disjunction between the pleasures of freedom and the risks of poverty.

### *The study*

During the group interview to become a volunteer on the food bus, we were all asked to divide into pairs and resolve a hypothetical moral dilemma: The world is about to end, but luckily a distant planet at our disposal can sustain human life; the problem is that only a limited number of people can be transported there in time. Given a list of briefly described characters who ranged from a nineteen year old heroin user, to a doctor in her mid-forties, to a twenty-five year old aeroplane mechanic, we tried to choose those who would best establish human civilisation anew. Eager to come up with the right answer, we busied ourselves plotting procreation, health care, spaceship maintenance and as many other essentials for the survival of the species as we could negotiate, only to learn that the object of the exercise was to demonstrate that no human life is worth more than another and that each of the characters should be considered a suitable representative of humanity. The point was to draw attention to the fact that no one had elected "the junkie." To dismiss a person's potential and worth on the basis of her heroin use was somewhat problematic for a group of people hoping to go out and help street kids.

It is also ironic since it is precisely the question of what sets a "junkie" apart that volunteers seek to address in their own way. Throughout the course their interviews, they consistently cited the discrepancy between their lot in life and others' untold suffering as the primary reason why they volunteer. They describe being moved into action by questions like "why do my children have a happy home while others' do not?" and "why should I be so depressed when I could get out there and help others much worse off than me?" In fact, having a duty to make amends for their relative good fortune was one unwritten axiom all the volunteers I interviewed shared. Given that they also had all been working on the food bus for a significant period of time— one year in a few cases, two to five in others, and as many as ten years in another case— there must be something about the experience of volunteering on the bus that brings them closer to satisfying this sense of duty.

This discussion is based on in-depth interviews with ten men and women who I worked with as a volunteer in on the food bus, an outreach

program for street kids in Melbourne. Open Family Australia, a national, non-profit organization, initiated the program as part of their long-standing mandate to "improve the well-being and self worth of alienated and excluded Australian street children, through unconditional support, wherever and whenever possible, with the view to reconnecting them to the community" (Open Family Australia, 1999). When Open Family decided to stop running its bus program in 1998, a small group of volunteers campaigned to take it over. The food bus is now entirely volunteer-run, operating only under the auspices of Open Family. It stays afloat with funding from a local private hospital and donations from the Melbourne City Food Bank.

When volunteers commit to making regular outings on the bus, they commit to becoming a recognisable and dependable presence on the street. The design of the program is premised on the idea that street kids will eventually come to know individual volunteers and, ideally, develop meaningful relationships with them. Volunteers set out with the belief that through these relationships, they can supply some of the emotional and material resources that street kids need to change their lives. The expectation is that by becoming a trusted figure in street kids' lives, volunteers might help restore them to "normal" life.

Yet, volunteers' accounts of their work chart a significant departure from what most set out to accomplish: namely bettering the lives of street kids by offering them non-judgemental assistance in the form of friendship, food, clothing and referrals. This is an ideal that most volunteers uphold. By their accounts, however, the majority of people who attend the bus are those whom volunteers affectionately call "oldies"—older men and women who might be classified as "dispossessed," but who are not in a "high risk" category as defined by the bus program. More significantly, most volunteers claimed that whatever it takes to make a tangible difference to either "streeties" *or* oldies is beyond their reach.

For example, Anne, one of the most experienced volunteers I interviewed, had been working in the bus program for five years. She signed on expecting that she might be able to help street kids in some way and in the hope that "if we go there then we can catch them and we can change it." She wanted to do something for street kids given the fact that her own three children grew up in a relatively secure, middle class environment.

I suppose I wanted to find out about street kids and why they were out there. And having children of my own... and knowing there were all these kids out there who are really disadvantaged and thinking, "well why is this so?" And "maybe there's something I can do to help these kids."

Early on, however, she found the experience did not live up to these expectations, and has since become cynical about the possibility that any volunteer on the bus program can actually "do something [to] change somebody's life." She now cautions, "If you're hanging out for that, you'll be waiting a long time." She recalled a recent occasion when she and another volunteer tried to approach a twelve-year old boy and his older sister, to no avail; "They were happy to take food, but literally did not want to talk." After countless experiences like this, she has become matter-of-fact about her ability to "do something." As she explains in reference to the twelve-year old street kid,

...All the motherly instincts came out [laughs] and I thought, "oh, the kid really needs to be looked after, he's so young." But I think I've got to the stage now where I thought, [sigh] "I really have done all I can do, I literally can't do any more..."

For other volunteers the hope to "save" street kids is similarly confounded by their practical experiences working on the bus. John started volunteering on the food bus because he enjoyed his previous work in a training program for unemployed youth. He appreciates that the program provides an opportunity for oldies to "meet other people like themselves" and it fills their "bellies for a night." But, he explains, "I just feel that they're keeping the target group away from the bus." He also recalled numerous occasions when he's tried to help people access more systematic help, but was unable to because of chronic shortages in Melbourne.

## *Alternate Routes*

The way the bus is I don't think I make a difference at all, actually. But I think, when I got into it I thought I had the potential to make maybe a little difference, but the reality is that I actually don't... and that's partly because a lot of people don't care, they're just there to mingle with each other and eat food. And when I do get some one who genuinely needs help, they might see that I genuinely care about them and want to help them, but the services let me down and them down more to the point and I can't help them so off they go.

He describes the frequency of experiences like this as very upsetting.

If you've really tried to get some one a roof over their head for a night, you can't do it... it's a terrible feeling... you feel terrible and you say "I'm sorry" and give them a blanket if you've got one, and off they go out on the street and that's, that's terrible.

John goes on to explain that he has "actually made a difference" to street kids only a few times, but then, not knowing where they ended up still worried him. He testifies that even if more street kids approached the bus, and even if they could be placed in beds at night, he would still feel powerless to make a real difference:

I would probably feel like... a little bit yeah... a bit of difference. But the other thing is too, with the heroin addicts, the feeling I always get when I'm dealing with heroin addicts is that it's a lost cause... like I just feel like, "ah god..." you know, "this person's sort of..." Well I certainly don't feel like I can make a difference to them. I don't have the skills and the knowledge... or else I feel I make a minuscule difference to them.

Issues like accommodation shortages and the number of oldies who use the food bus are not the biggest problem for John. The biggest problem

is being unable to address the underlying problems that yield young people's homelessness and heroin addiction in the first place.

Most volunteers are similarly affected by beholding the facts of life on the street. Some keep diaries of their experiences on the food bus and several said they are unable to sleep when they come home from their fortnightly shift. Discussing the various disturbing events and situations that volunteers had witnessed over the years took up a significant portion of the interviews. For Dana, who initially doubted whether she would be able "to stomach" volunteering on the food bus, it is the "absolutely reprehensible and dreadful situation" of homelessness and the hopelessness that it implies that upsets her most. As she describes,

But if you're living under a bridge or in the bush somewhere, how on earth can you ever have hope? You might as well go on taking the drugs and hope that one day you do overdose. You might not have the guts to do it right then and there. Because, really you know, it's the most pitiful thing... I just can't... can't imagine that pain...

Dana recalls one night in particular when a young woman came onto the bus "blasted off her brains" with her five young children:

She'd obviously been shooting up and the kids were running amok and I thought, "I don't understand what's going on here." And once they would have moved in and taken the children from mum... I'm not sure if that's the answer, that's not what I'm saying, but for her to be sitting there and us serving her up toasted sandwiches, you know, I can't comprehend it. I can't reason it out. Whether or not it's an answer I'm looking for that doesn't exist, I don't know. Maybe this is where the non-judgemental thing comes into it, where you don't make an assessment... But five children, one would be enough, but five children running around, and one just a babe in arms. And then where were they living?

The stories above illustrate more than the limits of the food bus; they also convey volunteers' anxieties about whether they are doing the right

thing for oldies and street kids. Volunteers struggle to understand how they ought to feel in situations when confronted with the limits of non-judgemental support and "toasted sandwiches," situations where questions like where people actually sleep at night become more pressing. As Nell, a kindergarten teacher in her mid-forties, elaborates when she explains why it makes her uncomfortable when friends congratulate her for doing "such a good thing:"

I'm not doing it for a "good thing," because it's a sad thing really... They don't understand that at times, there's things that I've seen that I won't tell anyone... just the terrible abuse that some one you know has been through or whatever, you just feel so, so down. And you give some kids a blanket at the end of the night, knowing that they're going to sleep down at the Yarra river and you know, it's bloody freezing cold or they'll probably get harassed or bashed up... We're driving back to, you know, a comfortable bed and place and good food... I mean it sounds blasé when we talk about it now, but when you're out there and it's cold and you give them a blanket and you see them walking off and you think "shit..." I mean, that is hard. But we can't do any better. We're giving a blanket.

Like many other volunteers, although she ultimately concludes that the program "does serve a purpose," Nell can only do so by referring to specific circumstances and small, but, tangible offerings.

These confounded hopes and expectations stand at significant odds with popular perceptions of volunteering. In Australia, it is common practice for volunteer organizations to play up the personal rewards of volunteering to recruit new and to retain old volunteers (Baldock, 1998). Although comprehensive studies in the United States have begun to ask why self-interest is the most common logic currently drawn on to make sense of volunteer work (Eliasoph, 1998; Wuthnow, 1991), most academic research focuses on what volunteers "get out of" the experience. For example, empirical studies into AIDS-related causes conclude that people are more likely to volunteer when "collective identification" in their volunteer organization is high (Simon, Sturmer and Stevens, 2000) or when they perceive the recipients of their assistance as "extended

selves" in some way (Kayal, 1993). As Snyder and Otomo (1992: 230) argue,

The good (and perhaps romantic) intentions related to humanitarian concern may not be strong enough to sustain volunteers who are faced with the tough realities of their activity .

Studies of volunteers in charitable organizations similarly conclude that when volunteers draw on explicit moral sentiments to describe the meaning and function of their work, they "co-construct" these values in order to define "for themselves" a sense of "moral personhood" and belonging to a "moral community" (Allahyari, 2000; Paolucci, 1995). The general consensus is that voluntary commitments reflect the "shrinking circle of concern" (Eliasoph, 1998) around oneself and one's community that characterises contemporary social and political life in general.

American political analyst Robert Putnam (1995) and the authors of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985) argue that volunteering is critical to maintaining the foundational democratic principle of civil engagement. They are concerned by Americans' level of direct engagement in politics falling steadily and sharply since the 1970s, which Putnam suggests corresponds to an as-profound decline in membership in civic and fraternal organizations.

Governments and politicians have also begun to make a case for the civic virtues of volunteering. The United Nations' International Year of the Volunteer occasioned a number of initiatives, grants and reports to chart ways for existing groups and organizations to recruit more people to their causes based on the principle that "volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society" (Universal Declaration on Volunteering, 2001). Governments now take an active interest in promoting and overseeing the voluntary welfare sector in particular. Studies by Brown, Kenny, Turner and Prince (2000) in Australia and Ullman (1998) in France suggest that a great deal of faith is invested in volunteer welfare organizations to remedy the "crisis of the state" to provide social welfare. Brown, Kenny, Turner and Prince suggest that in Australia, the voluntary welfare sector currently plays such a fundamental role in the

management and administration of social services that notions of charity have become almost obsolete.

The case at hand certainly complicates either notion, that volunteering is self-interested or that it can revive the post-crisis welfare state. If and when volunteers do explain their sense of purpose in self-interested terms, it appears to be a way of reconciling themselves to what they cannot accomplish. For example, Roberto, a student in his mid-twenties, insists that he volunteers for his own benefit and "no one else's" to set himself apart from volunteers he claims come out of their enclaves of privilege "to serve their duty to the community once a month." Notably, Roberto also sets himself apart from other volunteers by disclosing that his own personal experience with heroin makes it easier for him to "break the barrier" with street kids. Even though he believes that he has something to offer street kids, Roberto still finds it necessary to repeatedly claim that he cannot "change anything" by working on the bus:

I don't think I have any sort of great ability or belief that I'm going to change anything personally. I think for me, it's just very interesting to find out more for myself and get a better understanding of what's happening in the world, so to speak.

Exposure to the realities of poverty and homelessness makes believing in one's "great ability" to change things the only thing worse than claiming to know what being homeless or poor is like.

Because they regularly confront situations where what they have to offer appears hopelessly inadequate, volunteers' relative privilege becomes more pronounced by working on the food bus. The experience also raises more questions about volunteers' usefulness to others than it answers. Many assume personal responsibility for the fact that the bus program does not "do enough" and argue, "we've got to find a better way." Many have also given a great deal of thought to what might more effectively "catch" street kids and "save" them. But the question remains, how do we make sense of the fact that volunteers have chosen to address their concern for street kids through the bus program when they themselves disclaim their work as a kind of temporary stop-gap measure for much more profound problems? In order to answer this question, we need to look more closely at the social context of volunteers' work. In particular, we need to explore how the causes and conse-

quences of problems like homelessness are configured in the contemporary social and political imagination and whose responsibility they have become.

*The unmaking of welfare and the end of the social*

In *Work, consumerism, and the new poor*, Zygmunt Bauman (1998) argues that the role of the welfare state in industrial society, to cultivate a well-educated, robust and self-confident labour force and keep the supply of surplus labour in "constant readiness," has been made redundant with the ascent of post-industrial capitalism. He defines the welfare state as the product of "a historically occasioned encounter between the interests of capital and the moral sentiments of society at large" Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 78). The development of an economic order that has less and less use for surplus labour has summoned what he calls the "abrupt emergence" of consensus against the principle of "collective responsibility for individual misfortune." For Bauman this has had two major consequences: The ascendancy of consumer society and the impoverishment of politics. As he explains, the waning benefits that the contented majority receive from the restructured welfare state diminish the imperative to actively engage in political life. Consumer desires, then, become the main conduit of social mobilisation and integration and the "royal road to conflict resolution and order maintenance," creating ever new needs to "clamour for" Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 53).

Yet, the principal subject of *Work, consumerism and the new poor* is the changing role of the poor members of the citizenry. Since the 1970s, official discourses on the poor have ceased to focus on the question of "unemployability," and have increasingly set upon an "alien" and "hostile" group of people "who are beyond classes and outside hierarchy, with neither chance nor need of readmission": The underclass. According to Bauman's study, the underclass encompasses a heterogeneous group of "juvenile delinquents, school drop-outs, drug addicts, welfare mothers, looters, arsonists, violent criminals, unmarried mothers, pimps, pushers, and panhandlers" (1998: 66). Bauman argues that because poverty is no longer the subject matter of social policy "there is but a tenuous and easily crossed line dividing the recipients of welfare from drug-pushers, robbers and murderers" (1998: 77). Furthermore, he remarks,

The abnormality of the underclass phenomenon 'normalizes' the issue of poverty... It is precisely because the underclass is such a big and urgent problem that the bulk of people living in poverty are not a great issue that needs to be urgently tackled. Against the backdrop of the uniformly ugly and repulsive landscape of the underclass, the 'merely' poor shine as temporarily unlucky but essentially decent people who - unlike the underclassers - will make all the right choices and eventually find their way back into the accepted boundaries of society. (1998: 71)

Bauman's analysis is ratified in the Australian context by criminologist Robert White (1996). White argues that in Australia, one of the most rapidly restructured welfare states in the world, increasing numbers of people are not simply peripheral to the labour market, but entirely excluded from it. They, in turn, experience increasing levels of social and economic marginalisation, which White defines as the "complex process of stigmatisation and social regulation" that the experience of poverty, unemployment and depending on "handouts" involves (1996: 117). He characterises the decline of the Australian welfare state by a widened gap between rich and poor, higher unemployment, and specific social policies like adopting remedial rather than preventative social and economic measures, cutting and limiting access to social support services, and offering less benefits and allowances to the unemployed. In addition, governments have tightened the coercive aspects of welfare provision like work, income, assets, lifestyle and attitude tests to establish one's eligibility for welfare support and the level one "deserves." White (1996: 129) explains that,

For those who play by the established rules of the game the reward is a meagre sum with which to achieve a modicum of physical survival. However, for those who persistently find it difficult to succeed within the terms of the policy agenda, those who for example, find that more training does not necessarily guarantee greater employability, who refuse to accept the notion that welfare resources exist principally as a privilege rather than a right, or who exhibit high degrees of alienation, resentment, loss of faith in themselves

or the system, the status of being part of the underclass is an increasing reality in Australia.

These analysts illustrate how welfare policy now addresses poverty as a question of individual liability and responsibility. The ensuing underclass phenomenon is therefore both a condition of chronic structural inequality and a condition in which the poor struggle with the burden of reformation, the assumption that poverty is surmountable by anyone determined enough. As Bauman (1998) suggests, in societies that value freedom of choice above all, societies where consumption is the measure of successful living, having diminished options to consume appears to be simply "choosing" another life instead. He writes, "if being poor once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it is defined primarily as the plight of a flawed consumer" (1998: 1).

But how so-called "successful consumers," or the contented majority, can come to terms with the idea that one might choose to be poor, unemployed or homeless is another question altogether. Drawing on his previous work on "strangers" (1997, 17-34; 1995) Bauman highlights that these kinds of anxieties are another by-product of consumer society. In an era of unprecedented freedom to determine one's own life-founding identity—principally through the endless circuits of consumption—the underclass represent the fear that this freedom may be lost. Bauman suggests that the way we deal with these anxieties is primarily to exclude the underclass, to relegate them to "no go areas"—which he points out are "no go out" areas for those who live there (1995, 13). The poor have thus been cast out of the social world that "the rest of us" share at the same time as they have been expelled "from the universe of moral obligation" (1997, 35-45).

Moreover, Bauman (1998: 70) argues, poverty is now primarily the jurisdiction of penology and criminal law,

In a society of free consumers, curbing one's freedom is impermissible; but so is, many would say, not curtailing the freedom of people who use their freedom to abridge other people's freedoms, by accosting, pestering, threatening, fun-spiling, burdening consciences and otherwise making people's lives nasty.

In other words, "nastiness" is a condition that agents of social control guard against on behalf of those with the freedom to consume. They, in turn, chose to avoid "nastiness" by moving into their own selective "no come in areas."

Governmentality theorist, Nikolas Rose (2000) offers a different perspective on social control and the new poor. Like Bauman, he contends that neo-liberal governments' "bewildering variety of developments in regimes of social control"—from increasingly severe "three strikes and you're out" mandatory sentencing to "therapeutic rehabilitation"—can best be described as "constant scrutiny of the rights of individuals to access certain kinds of flows of consumption goods; recurrent switch points to be passed in order to access the benefits of liberty" (2000: 326). Unlike Bauman, however, Rose focuses on these "recurrent switch points," strategies and techniques of social control even more pervasive and panoptical than the prison-industrial complex. For him, the outcome of welfare reform is not exclusion. Rather, its primary aim is what he calls "responsibilisation: to reconstruct self-reliance in those who are excluded" (2000: 334). He writes, "it is through moral reformation, through ethical reconstitution, that the excluded citizen is to be re-attached to a virtuous community" (2000: 335).

In his earlier work (1996, 1993), Rose points out that issues like poverty, homelessness, and drug use have become the dominion of the community, the family, and the inner-lives of individuals. In the transformation of the modern welfare state, the subjects of government have changed. Rather than citizens, whose social responsibilities are understood in terms of a system of obligations to 'society' regulated by the state, contemporary social subjects are now to be active in *their own* government. Their responsibilities are understood in terms of allegiance to one's "networks of personal concern and investment" (1996: 336). Rose asks us to consider, for example, the contemporary salience of the vocabulary of "community." The advent of community care, community workers, community safety, or the notions of "risk communities" and "ethnic communities" indicates a profound transformation in ways of thinking and acting that used to be expressed in a social language. There has even been talk recently of a global, "democratic community." As Rose explains, "it seems we are seeing the emergence of a range of ratio-

nalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities," even, he argues, "where the allegiances presupposed do not immediately appear to exist" (1996: 330-331).

Rose's thesis seems to aptly describe contemporary approaches to governing certain problematised forms of behaviour as "community problems" and problems of the "ethical individual." His work helps explain the latest official answer to curbing illicit drug use and heroin-related mortality in Australia, the heightened public awareness of which has put significant pressure on the principal drug policy-making body in Australia—the Ministerial Council Drug Strategy. Early in 2001 they launched a \$27.5 million advertising and information campaign to promote "the community," namely families, as "our strongest defence against the drug problem." The campaign featured blitz advertising on prime-time television over a period of two months, where one series of dramatic 'drug abuse' imagery, culminating with an adolescent boy being zipped into a body bag, was followed by a separate ad, in which sympathetic white, middle-class parental figures informed viewers "that every home in Australia" would receive an instruction booklet on how to talk to children about drugs.

On one hand, the campaign made a very palpable case for the Federal Government's willingness to tackle Australia's illicit "drug problem," promoting its commitment to being "Tough on Drugs." On the other hand, it made clear that the onus is on individuals and families. The Prime Minister's opening declaration in the information booklet reads, "I believe the best drug prevention program in the world is a responsible parent sitting down with their children and talking with them about drugs" (Commonwealth Government, 1). Such a campaign adheres to the Federal Government's consistent refusal to "send the wrong message" with regards to implementing drug policies, namely by rejecting proposals for safe-injecting rooms and heroin-prescription trials. The right message in the post-social order does indeed seem to be for the family and communities to assume responsibility to manage unruly and unsightly problems like drug use.

The ethic and rationale of working on the bus program seems to conform to the systems of social control that Rose describes as ever-more constitutive of subjectivity. Volunteers might be understood as *governed*

through the kinds of initiatives outlined above, through their sense of community morality and responsibility to help street kids. They might also be seen to be *governing* street kids' lack thereof, particularly in their efforts to restore street kids to "the community" by way of guidance and support. What Rose and others (Cruikshank, 1996; Baidstow, 1994/95; Cruikshank, 1993) bring to light is that governments and experts in post-industrial states attribute poverty to the order of the Self rather than to the social order. From the sociologist's perspective, however, governmentality theory leaves little room to explore the contradictions and incongruities such a profound transformation produces. It also offers little in the way to demonstrate how strategies and technologies of social control operate at an everyday level.

Likewise, Bauman's analysis of the anxieties that the underclass generate raises further questions about how everyday, "successful consumers" respond to the existence of so many people who do not and cannot "live the dream." Volunteers talk at length about where street kids come from and why they live the lives they do. A recurrent theme throughout the interviews is the great divide between the privileges that volunteers enjoy and street kids' lack of basics like food and shelter. Volunteers describe being bewildered by the fact that some people have so few opportunities to improve their lot in life. In fact, it troubles them a great deal.

Bauman suggests that the anxieties that the underclass generate are two-fold: They are "strangers" to be feared, and, at the same time, their very existence challenges the supremacy of consumer society. The creation of an underclass not only merges the condition of being poor with criminal intent. It also relegates a large group of people to the status of being essentially dispensable. Bauman convincingly argues that the main tactic deployed to deal with this problematic class of citizens is exclusion. Volunteers' impulse to do the opposite—to come into contact with "strangers"—seems then worthy of more in-depth investigation. It is to this task that we now turn.

### *Respect and reparation: Volunteers mediated intents and purposes*

When volunteers talk about what the bus program does accomplish they do so in relation to the personal and emotional repercussions of the problems—such as mental illness, drug addiction, family breakdown, parental drug use, neglect, and physical or sexual abuse—that they associate

with street kids and "oldies." Alera, who says that the food bus does not even "come close" to its objective to help street kids, affirms that the program is ultimately worthwhile because of the positive impact "just listening" and "just caring" might have. As she elaborates in relation to a friendship she's formed with one of the food bus' regulars,

I do think that by going out there, me being a nurse... and sitting down with Neil for the whole night, because you know, you get your friends, and just chatting to him about things and him knowing that I accept him for who he is and I don't judge him or I don't say, "you should do this or you should do that." I just listen to him and talk to him and try and make it known that he's not worthless, he's a human being and he's no less of a person than anyone else walking down the street. I hope he knows that, and if he does then I think any one would get something out of that. I think being respected by any one is worthwhile.

Similarly Eddie, who maintains that what volunteers can do for streeties and oldies is finite, offers this example of the program's value:

It provides a meeting place for these people, somewhere to gather around. And it provides company for lonely people. Heaps of lonely people in Melbourne.... And it's great if you can provide... if you can talk to these people... A couple of years ago, we had a guy in his mid-thirties— he only came out at night because he was badly scarred— and one of the pretty volunteer girls sat down and talked to him for, you know, twenty minutes or something. Made his night, because some one actually came and had a yak to him... So it does serve a purpose.

It is plausible that volunteers reconcile themselves to these interpretations of what the bus program accomplishes in *order to* feel fulfilled and confident in the work they do. The prospects of providing food and clothes and friendship are certainly much better than saving lives. Yet, one of the most common themes in volunteers' narratives is how streeties and oldies are sequestered to deal with their needs, worries, fears and

insecurities ostensibly alone, with very little formal or informal support. As Anne surmises after five years as a volunteer,

I get the feeling with the kids, whatever background they've had, nobody loves them... I just presume they're there because home's an awful place.

John also believes that a general lack of love and attachment sets young people on the path where he finds them.

I mean, I've never had heroin, I wouldn't know, but I imagine what would drive someone to heroin is that you're just so unhappy, you just... you know, everything's wrong in your life and you're having such a shit time and you feel there's very few people... that really need you in the world or love you and you think 'there's an escape:' Someone offers heroin to you and it's bloody fantastic... That must be what happens, I'd imagine.

Volunteers describe the loneliness and isolation that oldies face in similar terms. Joseph, a volunteer in his mid-sixties, has become well acquainted with many older men who he says have "lost all their confidence." He recounts a story of one man in particular, who has lived in a boarding house since he lost his job, left his pregnant wife and their three children, and had the first of several "breakdowns" nine years ago.

I asked him, "Are you in touch with your wife?" He says, "She phoned me a few weeks ago." "Is she with anyone else?" "No," he says. The eldest [child] is 22, the youngest is nine. "Why don't you go back? They want you, your children." He says, "When I get my confidence back and I know I can support them." And that's the... 90% of the people on the streets will tell me that: "I want to get my confidence back." Now, I don't know if they've or he's ever been on drugs or what... if heroin does that to a person, I just don't know.

Most volunteers believe that accommodation shortages, limited rehabilitation facilities, the closure of mental health institutions, and the fact that governments are not spending enough money on "these people" make the odds facing street kids and oldies insurmountable. In the case of street kids, it is particularly hard to imagine them finding a place to live or a job without more support. Alera suggests that "growing up in a home that's totally destructive" might be "too much to undo."

I mean, I know they have a choice, but that's just so far ahead of them. I'd just admire someone so much if they came from that sort of background, were on the streets, were using heroin, and got off it and went and did a degree or went and got a stable job... I just think that would be super-human.

Anne goes further to place the problems she sees in a context of unpredictable society-wide upheaval.

I suppose we're going through a great period of industrial change at the moment, a bit like the industrial revolution, where I think the whole world's turned upside down and you've got unemployment and things changing: there are no jobs for unskilled people, which puts pressure on poor families... I think it puts enormous pressure on them financially if they're unemployed— low self-esteem and that could be a problem for the children in that family, and I think that's a— because of the times we're living in at the moment, with all those unskilled jobs disappearing, I don't know what the answer is there either... I don't know how it will all sort out. I don't know, I can't see ahead to see how it will sort out, but I just feel it's a time of social change and we're all rocked by it.

At a time when children, particularly the children of unemployed parents, are increasingly likely to stumble over the obstacles of inexorable social change, expecting "real" change seems as futile as trying to predict the future.

Given their sensitivity to the apparent hopelessness of the oldies' and street kids' situations, volunteers estimate the merit of their work in the currency of respect. They value the way the bus program occasions simple, but meaningful opportunities for streeties and oldies to be treated as "normal." They also appreciate that it sets up "a mobile community centre" for people who might not have homes, a community, family, or strong friendship ties to mix together and to share jokes, ideas and opinions. As Anne explains,

We're there from the bus, you've got the oldies, who are perhaps living in a room somewhere, you've got the kids on the street. But they all come here and everybody mixes together... and they talk about what they want to, they put their point of view forward, they have something to eat, they might have a hug, they might have a laugh and then everybody goes back... to what they were doing before.

Volunteers consider giving streeties and oldies food and clothes and creating a time and space for them to enjoy themselves worthwhile primarily because it gives them "something they wouldn't have otherwise." They value the few opportunities they have had to form on-going relationships with oldies and street kids even more. As Billy describes her effort to help an "oldie" she has become close to:

We probably take it for granted that we can talk to our mum and dad, go and visit them on weekends— they perhaps don't. Coming there and having a cup of coffee, talking to us, it's probably the highlight of their week, some of the time... You know, they come and tell you things like their father died or their mother died... I'm thinking of one person in particular, whose father's been very sick and he lost his mother at Christmas... And I make a point of, a couple of weeks down the track [asking], "how's your dad going?"... And you know my daughter filled in for me a couple of weeks later and I said to her, "now just ask Greg how his dad is." And when I went back a fortnight later, he was so thrilled... It was just that little bit of personal whatever.

Anne also feels as though she made a difference to someone by offering him emotional support,

This particular young boy who I got close to, his mother was an alcoholic and he'd been abused and drugged up and... He would say, "look, I know alcoholism is a disease, I know she can't help what she does, I know she can't help how she is," but underneath it there was this quiet, "but I just wish she'd love me." You know, you could just tell this kid was totally unloved and he desperately wanted... 'Cause I'd say, "well, give me hug then" and he'd go all sort of gooey and then he'd give me the biggest hug ever... And he'd say, "oh all right then," but he'd give me the biggest hug ever. He just loved it. He just wanted to be hugged and loved and nobody— that's how it appeared to me— nobody had ever just loved him.

While Anne cannot stop someone's mother from drinking and she cannot find him a loving home, she can respond to his immediate muted loneliness. Correspondingly, being a supportive figure for streeties and oldies is vital to her sense of purpose on the food bus.

Listening to volunteers talk about the causes and effects of homelessness, poverty and drug use, one hears distinct echoes of the social world that Bauman and Rose describe. The world, according to volunteers, is a place where poverty is not an external condition of unemployability, but an internalised condition of lacking confidence, being unloved or having "nothing to lose." In this world, volunteers' small efforts to repair the damage that "dysfunctional families" or generally "feeling shit" has done are important, even if they cannot effectively "save" anyone.

Attending to the subjective causes and consequences of poverty, homelessness and drug use could further be construed as an effort to "responsibilise," or what Rose (1996: 347) calls "working with the abjected by virtue of their lack of competence for responsible, ethical self-management". Yet, few volunteers took the personal causes of problems like drug addiction and homelessness to mean that, therefore, they are the fault of the individual. For example, Alera attributes heroin use to the individual experience of depression,

A lot of people on heroin have an underlying mental illness and they're just self-medicating because they're not from a society that says, "go see a psychologist or a doctor"... and I think they don't really acknowledge their feelings and their emotions. They just think, "well, I'm feeling like shit" and "I'll take this" and "it makes me feel better." So it's like a trap and it just keeps happening.

But she also goes on to explain,

I think there's steps in life—I don't want to sound like some sort of textbook— but for someone to be on the streets, there has to be a cause for that... so heroin's not really the problem I'm talking about... I just think, you know, unemployment, high expectations.... I think you sort of are looked down on more if you're from the lower class and you have a lot more expectations to do something with your life. And even though society's wrong in putting those expectations on people and saying "this is what success is," it sort of, still happens.

In other cases, when I asked volunteers why they think people live on the streets, they protested their ignorance in order to protect the privacy of the people they've met. Billy maintains, "I don't know, I've often wondered, I mean just out of curiosity, because again... I don't judge them, so I don't really care." Later she reasserts, "we shouldn't judge... we don't know what sets them... makes them turn to drugs or whatever." Some volunteers considered talking about the oldies' and street kids' personal problems fault-finding, which was at odds with their aim to be non-judgmental.

In these ways, volunteers did not give purpose to their work by drawing on the rhetoric of reformation—that they could and should correct oldies' and street kids' "problem behaviour." Rather, they spoke more fluently about volunteering in terms of reparation—that the work helps them better understand who street kids are, where they come from, and what they need. To illustrate the merits of the bus program they told sto-

ries about the small, but tangible gestures of respect, support and friendship that they have extended to street kids and "oldies." To illustrate what sustains their own commitment to the bus program, volunteers talked primarily about the value of simply coming into contact with street kids and "oldies," people who would otherwise remain a mystery to them.

For example, Pia, an ex-corporate controller in her late-forties says that until she started working on the food bus she lived in "a very conservative, narrow-minded world, where the things that the majority of society perceived as wrong, were wrong." She explains that when "you get a house and a mortgage" not much else concerns you.

Up until then I had no knowledge of any of this, couldn't care less. And when I started working as a volunteer, I just became very, very interested in the behaviour. Because of having to acknowledge how so many people perceive their behaviour as very right even though the majority of society is looking at it as out of control.

Becoming more curious about "behaviour" on the food bus prompted Pia to quit her job and study psychology full time.

Likewise, Dana explains that at first, volunteering "absolutely blew her mind apart" because "there's a lot of us out there who haven't got any idea what's happening in our community." She says that she did not expect to be able to handle such a "heavy scene." Volunteering has not taught her how to "handle" the street scene, but rather that "you can't make a hard and fast rule about anything."

As they say, you know, we can't be judgemental, can't be threatening in any way... I used to be really hard-nosed about injecting rooms— I was black and white about it: "Take these needles away from them, throw them into rehab, this is what's going to happen" and, you know, "slap them around the ears a bit" and "you'll do it, this is what's going to happen and you'll end up in jail with the murderers... otherwise you get on with it!" Of course it's not like that, it's nothing like that... You have a very different perspective when you're not involved in it.

Volunteers value the "very different perspective" that working on the food bus offers them. Some stand up for street kids to friends, co-workers and family members based on their experiences working on the bus program. Alera described how the other nurses that she works with treat heroin addicts like "animals who don't realise what they are doing." She is attentive to the very human anguish that having to steal or pawn goods in order to buy heroin creates, explaining, "you hate doing and it tears you apart, but you do it anyway." Anne similarly describes how the "reasonably important," wealthy men and women that her husband works with often make comments like, "you make your own luck in life." She says that they have got no idea,

...that these people are— that they live these lives, they don't know where they're sleeping, where they're eating and they have to grab the moment as it comes to sleep or to eat or whatever, and you can't fit them back into a normal, everyday life and this is why.

For some volunteers, bearing witness to systemic marginalisation renders the idea that you make your own luck in life an outright fallacy. For most, working on the bus program means coming to respect the subjective impact of social marginalisation. Attending to the inner, emotional lives of streeties and oldies only feels like an accomplishment because lacking love, support and respect is a crucial aspect of being on the street according to volunteers. Their basic aim to befriend streeties and oldies is something they do *because* to be poor and homeless in the post-social order is to be evermore disregarded and stigmatised. What volunteers bring to light when they stress the importance of asking after someone's particular concerns, giving them a hug, or simply remembering their name, is an aspect of being a member of the underclass that Rose precludes, but for Bauman (1998: 91) is crucial:

In the book-balancing of a consumer society, the poor are unequivocally a liability, and by no stretch of the imagination can they be recorded on the side of present or future

assets. And so for the first time in recorded history the poor are now purely and simply a nuisance.

Bauman (1995: 15) also argues that the post-industrial social order intensifies freedom "among the joyfully and willingly seduced, while tapering it almost beyond existence among the deprived and panoptically regulated". Yet, strangers still do live among us, at least when the fortified walls of prisons and "no-go" areas do not hide them altogether. Working on the food bus does not allow volunteers to resolve the anxieties that street kids generate by restoring them to "normal life." It does allow them, however, to venture into no-go areas previously unknown to them, to venture into previously impossible social encounters, to better understand experiences so seemingly disconnected from their own. Without their volunteer work, the relationships between volunteers and street kids or oldies would be unlikely indeed.

As Anne illustrates, as she tries to explain why she continues to volunteer despite her frustrations with the bus program,

I knew I'd find it hard, I think. I knew I'd find it hard to talk to the kids, 'cause I feel, rightly or wrongly, I feel that they look at me and think, "well, what would this middle-class bitch... [know]... about our sort of life?"

But now, she says,

I've gotten to know quite a lot of the oldies and youngies and I get along quite well with them. And I... I, my feelings changed in that I don't really believe that there's anything that I can do that's going to change the way their lives are.

In this sense, abandoning the dream of "changing the ways their lives are" is not only par for the course. It also seems to be the first step that volunteers take to defend the different kind of meaning that their work takes on.

### **Conclusion**

In the post-industrial political imagination it does seem as though the material reality of poverty has evaporated into thin air, or rather, dissipated into the inner-recesses of the Self. But poverty is also necessary. It haunts us with the spectre of social dislocation so that we guard our goods from the inevitable "bads" that freedom reaps. The current social, cultural and political order has clearly moved from redistributing work to redistributing unemployment (Beck 1997). Neo-liberal political rationality continues to advance the notion that minimising welfare "hand-outs" maximises the possibilities of self-advancement and responsible citizenship. As the Australian Federal Minister for Workplace Relations, Tony Abbott so succinctly puts it:

Now it's the responsibility of governments to put policies in place, which over time will allow people to improve their situation, policies in place that will allow people to earn more and to keep more of what they earn. And that's what government is trying to do. But we can't abolish poverty, because poverty is in part a function of individual behaviour. We can't stop people drinking. We can't stop people gambling. We can't stop people having substance problems. We can't stop people from making mistakes that cause them to be less well-off than they might otherwise be. We cannot remove risk from society without removing freedom, and that's the last thing any government should do (in Gordon and Gray, 2001).

For the Federal Government, the risk of poverty is a fundamental measure of the pleasures of freedom. But to defend against the uncertainties of neo-liberalism— about its legitimacy and the price we must pay for its greater freedoms— poverty must be the fault of the defective individual.

Considering volunteers' work in this context, I have highlighted the way they confront the profound contradictions of living with those whose deficit of freedom subsidises the privileges that "the rest of us" enjoy. That volunteers claim their work has very little power to change oldies' or street kids' lives except to treat them with respect is a very particular approach to issues like homelessness and drug use. This claim

only makes sense in a world where people are increasingly considered responsible for their own misfortune and left to fend for themselves, a world in which the poor are denied "the right 'to claim damages' by presenting themselves as victims of societal malfunction" (Bauman, 1998: 70).

Arguably, however, the argument that poverty is surmountable by anyone with enough confidence, like "the rest of us," is neither fully conclusive nor entirely convincing. Volunteers struggle with the consequences of delegating once-were social problems to imaginary communities, broken families and disempowered individuals every night they work on the food bus. The idea that the problems streeties and oldies face can and should be remedied by the individual, the family or voluntary emissaries from so-called "moral communities" seems unlikely to volunteers. In this sense, doing the work of "community responsabilisation" seriously undermines its coherence.

Rather, the fact that some live with little support and few options is the primary reason why volunteers see a role for themselves and for society's collective responsibility in proving public support for oldies and street kids' private needs. Ultimately, despite the shortcomings of the bus program, volunteers structure their commitment according to what they have learned about oldies and street kids' lives in a world "turned upside down." Their work is grounded in the perception that people endure particularly damaging, emotional effects of social marginalisation and dis-possession. For the most part, volunteers described the people they've met through the bus program as poor, having "nothing to lose," and no valued role to play in contemporary consumer society. The personal dimensions of being a member of "the underclass" also informed volunteers' ideals for what could actually change lives. They believe that street kids and oldies should be entitled to loving, supportive friendships and families and have access to "other options" like housing, education and employment, all of which are essential to achieving a minimum standard of living and quality of life.

In the meantime, in the quest for answers to questions that the post-social order raises —questions like, "why do my children have a loving home and other do not?"—volunteers chose to come into closer contact with oldies and street kids. In this way, they try to resolve some of the anxiety that living with "strangers" generates, not by closing their eyes and ears to it, but to be in its presence. Their accounts of working on the

food bus sound remarkably like Iris Marion Young's (1990) democratic ideal of "city life," wherein people witness and appreciate different social experiences that they do not share, nor fully understand.

In the post-industrial social order, humanitarian volunteer work cannot be reduced to either a subtle mechanism of social control or a means of easing one's overworked conscience. In an era when the anxieties and disjunctions of consumer society are increasingly channelled into communitarian solutions, volunteers expand the social world that they inhabit to include the lives and experiences of marginalised "others." In an era when governments actively expel the poor from the universe of moral obligation, and more importantly, from the domain of a shared humanity, volunteers advance an ethic and logic of 'non-judgement', that the people they meet on the street are worthy of consideration and respect. In this sense, humanitarian volunteer work has become one of the few interfaces between disparate social experiences. Given the very arbitrariness of who is left standing in the contemporary social order, perhaps volunteers' commitment to the food bus is also a way of holding out the hope that some one would do the same for them if they fell into oldies or street kids' place.

### *Notes*

1. This paper presents some of the central findings of research carried out during the course of my Master of Arts at the Ashworth Centre for Social Theory at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

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# The Possibility of Pleasure: Foucault's Philosophy of the Subject and the Logic of an Appeal to Aesthetics

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Some of the most common complaints against Foucault's work are that he does not provide a philosophy of the subject and that (or, and so) he provides neither any normative grounds upon which to judge regimes of power nor alternative themes or ideals to the domination that he diagnoses. However, I argue that it is precisely because of Foucault's philosophy of the subject that he cannot suggest prescriptive action against the domination that he diagnoses.<sup>1</sup> Because of Foucault's philosophy of the subject he must allow for a greater human autonomy than what would allow him to prescribe action against the domination that he diagnoses. Further, and following this, I argue that Foucault's philosophy of the subject makes aesthetics the most logical place for him to look for experiences of freedom while respecting human autonomy without having to appeal to normative rhetoric or the logic of any particular discourse or form of subjection.<sup>2</sup>

Foucault's analysis of autonomous fields of discourse and his analysis of modern subjects constituted along the axis of a truth, an ethic and power are mutually re-enforcing to his philosophy of the subject. I will show how this comes about through a consideration of the analytics of finitude.

## *The Subject of Knowledge*

Foucault's analysis of the analytic of finitude can be found in *The Order of Things* (1973). Foucault argues that it is along the lines of the analytic of finitude that modern subjects<sup>3</sup> are constituted. I argue that his adherence to the analytic of finitude as the framework for modern thought and the constitution of modern subjects enables Foucault to develop a philosophy of modern subjects as constituted along the axis of power, ethics and truth. According to Foucault, modern subjects develop with twenti-

19th century western thought's attempt to develop "a philosophical foundation for the possibilities of knowledge" (Foucault, 1973: 335).

For Foucault, subjects and subjectivities are only one mode of self-consciousness but it is the mode particular to knowledge. Because he is dealing, in *The Order of Things*, with possible foundations of knowledge and establishes that this is where modern subjects arises, he is dealing with possibilities for founding subjects and subjectivities: "the subject of Foucauldian history is a subject of *knowledge*" (Schwartz, 1998: 20). It is therefore, perfectly appropriate that we look here for Foucault's philosophy of the subject. Further, it is in part because of its relationship to knowledge that Foucault's philosophy of the subject is so amenable to aesthetics as a means of freedom. Both the analytics of finitude and aesthetics of existence require moments of 'problematization', that is, they both require moments when humans reflect upon their current situation and in so doing are transformed into subjects of knowledge (Schwartz, 1998: 21). I will go through a summary of the analytic of finitude and then show where I think this analytics of finitude means, for Foucault, that modern subjects are subjects of power, ethics and truth. In the last part of the essay I will take up the congruence of aesthetics to Foucault's philosophy of the subject.

### ***The Analytic of Finitude: Life, Labour and Language Condition their Own Possibilities***

Foucault shows that the analytic of finitude emerges with the study of Man's mode of being, the human sciences of economics, philology and biology. The analytic of finitude is a newly emergent relationship between being and representation in the human sciences, as distinct from Classical discourse, in which being and representation were found in a common locus, that of God. What characterizes this difference is that in the analytic of finitude, the line between the representation of objects, and the objects of the human sciences ceased to be transparent. For example, in the factual knowledge of biology we learn of the limitations imposed upon us by our having lived on the planet as animals already. In the factual knowledge of linguistic we learn of the limitations imposed upon what we can say today because of what humans have said already. What we can uncover in the human sciences are the limits imposed upon our lives. Within the analytics of finitude positivity bring us to our fac-

tual limitations. The particular relationship between being and representation is mediated by each of their conditions of possibility.

Now life, labour and language belong to an order of things with laws interior to themselves. In the development of modern human sciences it was required of life, labour and language that they should themselves define the conditions of their possibilities. Representations were no longer the primitive seat of the truth of living beings.

From now on there is an interior 'mechanism' in languages which determines not only each one's individuality but also its resemblances to the others: it is this mechanism, the bearer of identity and difference, the sign of adjacency, the mark of kinship, that is now to become the basis for history. (Foucault, 1973: 236)

Again, for example, in the natural sciences we find organic structures conditioning that which appears in nature. This is both a move to interiority and exteriority of representations. What is represented now is something internal to and conditioning the representation. Simultaneously, "the very being of that which is represented is not going to fall outside representation itself" (Foucault, 1973: 240). When one represents something to oneself, in these human sciences, it is only the appearance to that individual of the internal order of life, language, or labour. What appears in a representation is the external relation of that internal order with the human knower. I anticipate myself only slightly to note that what conditions these external relationships are modern subjects' limitations, which have just been uncovered.

Life, labour and language in this moment abandon what had been their natural site of representation and "withdraw into the depths of things and roll up upon themselves in accordance with the laws of life, production, and language" (Foucault, 1973: 313). Now objects of investigation appear as they do because of processes interior to themselves. Life, labour and language reach back into laws interior to themselves for their own development. Foucault argues that in this movement the objects of the modern human sciences are folding up on themselves, reaching into themselves to develop again out of their being, and so hollowing out a space within themselves. Where God had been present in the shared locus and direct link between being and representation, we

see living beings taking themselves for their own conditions of possibilities. And again, this forming of a circular link characterizes the objects of the human sciences.

*Man as Knowing Subject and Known Object Arrives via his Limitations*

Immediately Foucault tells us that Man arises within the hollow formed by this circular link (Foucault, 1973: 313). The circular link found within the objects of the human sciences is designated as the space of Man. Indeed, Man is required in these hollows within life, labour and language because it is he who speaks, labours and lives as an animal. Man, as an object of knowledge, therefore is given as the source of the depths of life, labour and language. When representations in language no longer are transparent, this is because Man has spoken before. When Man's biology is conditioned by an organic structure then this is because Man has evolved. And so Man is given this imperious place within the order of things, as the source of conditions making representations possible but this place is not without its ambiguity. As we saw above, positivity in the human sciences bring Man to his factual limitations.

All these contents that his knowledge reveals to him as exterior to himself, and older than his own birth, anticipate him, overhang him with all their solidity, and traverse him as though he were merely an object of nature, a face doomed to be erased in the course of history. (Foucault, 1973: 313)

So just as Man takes up the all-important central locus of life, labour and language, the same thought insists on revealing Man's limitations.

Man as a knowing subject also arises in the space hollowed out as life, labour and language condition themselves. The knowledge arises that when Man represents something, he is ordering it. In this he is a sovereign. However, that order is conditioned by something beyond his representations. In this he is an enslaved sovereign. His representations are not transparent but have limitations imposed upon them. "For modern thought, the positivity of life, of production and labour provides a foundation for the limited character of knowledge" (Foucault, 1973: 316-17). Now it appears that the way Man knows the world immediately imposes limitations on the possibilities of what he can know, of what he can

think. What he sees is not a pure truth. Rather, he sees himself ordering the world, he sees himself seeing; he is the observed spectator (Foucault, 1973: 312).

Put differently, the very internal laws of life, labour and language within man determine the external relations that Man has with his life, labour and language, which are representations. The quest of knowledge then is for the conditions, or limitations, within man, of the representations available to him.

### *The Quest for Impossibility*

In this quest of knowledge, when facing the conditions within that make representations available to them, subjects are also always made aware of what these conditions make impossible. The study of Man's finitude thus always points to the infinity of what is impossible, that which we cannot say, do or think at the moment. "We perceive the finitude and limits they impose, we sense, as thought on their blank reverse sides, all that they make impossible" (Foucault, 1973: 314).

Also, because Man sees his thought as limited and because he sees this limitation against a back-drop of what could be otherwise, the quest of thought is not only for the grounds of representation but also for the extent of their validity. Further, because what is required is knowledge of the conditions for Man's knowledge, that knowledge is perfectible. The search for the conditions of Man's knowledge provides Man with the justification to claim perfectible knowledge.

Finitude provides itself a positive foundation for the possibility of knowledge by referring to itself ceaselessly, "from the positivity of the contents to the limitations of knowledge, and from the limited positivity of knowledge to the limited knowledge of the contents" (Foucault, 1973: 317). The limitations of Man's knowledge are the grounds for Man's knowledge. Modern thought and modern Man as an object and as a subject of knowledge are all, therefore, characterized by this analytic of finitude.

### *The Analytic of Finitude as a Philosophy of Modern Subjects*

Having briefly outlined the analytic of finitude I want to show how I see the axis of truth and ethics, in Foucault's philosophy of the subject as deriving from an analysis of the analytic of finitude. I will consider the power of Foucault's subject shortly when I discuss the analytic of dis-

course. In the ceaseless referral of finitude to itself we see a subject emerge that must have the characteristics of a truth, "a set of relations to modes of interpretation of one's relations to self and others" and an ethic, "a set of relations to oneself and one's capacities" (Patton, 1998: 69). Modern subjects require both a truth and an ethic because of their factual limitations as revealed to them in the analytic of finitude. The subject is no longer transparent; one must necessarily relate to oneself. "Subjects appear to require this self-attachment, this process by which one becomes attached to one's own subjecthood" (Butler, 2001: 17).

Further, one must necessarily relate to the understandings of oneself and others as finite. Nor are modern subjects, as the object of thought transparent. A relationship is thereby needed between the finitude of Man as an object of study and the finitude of the Man as the subject of knowledge. One is never alone in this, one relates to oneself and interprets one's relations to oneself along the lines established within a contemporary community. "But for Foucault, it is clear that one attaches to oneself through a norm, and so self-attachment is socially mediated; it is no immediate and transparent relation to the self" (Butler, 2001: 17).

We must bear in mind that the attachments and relations that modern subjects establish with themselves arise as a mode of self-consciousness particular to the possibilities for founding knowledge. Human subjects require a truth and an ethic because their finitude is the source of all possible knowledge, particularly as this lends modern subjects the justifiable claim to perfectible knowledge. As their finitude becomes the source of all possible knowledge for modern subjects there is established a relation to their capacities, at least their capacity to know. It also immediately establishes a relation to how modern subjects think about the interpretations of themselves as factually limited knowers. The finitude of the modern knowing subject is the source, not the impossibility of all knowledge. That in itself is a mode of relating to interpretations of our capacities. Further, the knowing subject then seeks to ground their knowledge, a further relation to interpretations of relations to capacities. I have teased these threads out to make my point that it is in the analytic of finitude that Foucault finds the modern subject as one with a truth and an ethic. However, I do not understand the process to be layered or temporal as the presentation here might suggest. Rather, I prefer the notion of "ceaseless referral" to capture the sense of the process.

*The Analytic of Discourse*

To analyse discourse Foucault undertakes two strategies with regard to the analytic of finitude; he pins all his empirical findings to the structure of the analytic of finitude, which he has diagnosed; and he brackets off the first order experience of the phenomenologists in order that he might pin the empirical discourses he studies to the framework of the analytic of finitude, waking us from our anthropological slumber. Performing the second phenomenological bracketing is his assurance that he is not entering into normative debates within the discourses he analyses nor is he taking seriously any common-sense or everyday understanding of those involved with the discourse.

Foucault claims that he does not need to share the beliefs of those who take these serious speech acts seriously in order to locate them among all the things that are said and written. He can count on the seriousness of those involved in the actual discourse to select, and thus limit, what is taken seriously at any given period, and to defend it, criticize it, and comment upon it. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984: 52)

The two strategies, of pinning all his findings to the analytic of finitude and of performing the second phenomenological bracketing, are mutually re-enforcing. In applying the workings of serious discursive practices to an analytic of finitude he shows not only that discursive practices are self-supporting but also that their seriousness is grounded not in Truth, but a modern framework of thought.

In avoiding all interpretation but tracking the changes within discursive statements, Foucault can see the field of historical knowledge as a self-supporting, self-regulating field with ties to and supports with non-discursive elements in society, which set the conditions for existence of serious discursive statements. Transformations within discursive fields take place regulated by the rule-governed system<sup>4</sup> of that discursive field and then whether or not a discursive statement is taken up within society will depend upon, to put it bluntly, how it might be used. Discourses then are "finite and contingent yet subject to their own rules for rarefaction" much like the self-supporting finitude of the human sciences (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984: 91). This allows Foucault to outline an

analytic of discursive formations, rather than enter into any normative analysis of the discursive statements that he studies.

One can equally substitute 'discourse' for 'man' in Foucault's account of the analytic of finitude: 'At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of [discourses] existence, we discover a finitude . . . The limitation is expressed not as a limitation imposed upon [discourse] from the outside, but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitations. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984: 92)

When the discursive field is self-supporting and autonomous then Foucault is able to show how power attaches to different serious discursive statements and enables their truth effects.

In a society such as ours-or in any society, come to that-multiple relations of power traverse, characterize and constitute the social body; they are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. (Foucault, 2003: 24).

This brings us to the third aspect of modern subjects, "a body that is trained or cultivated in certain ways (subject to 'power')" (Patton, 1998: 69). A subject, for Foucault, must have a body trained or cultivated in certain ways because of his analysis of discourse. He does not take seriously the logic, the sense or the normative debates of discourses. He therefore can argue that human subjects embody these discourses only because they can be trained or cultivated in certain ways, not because these ways are more or less human. To argue that these discourses, and their rationalities cross the bodies of human subjects, Foucault must posit a subject capable of taking up and embodying these rationalities. For example, in *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I, the body is the target of discourses of sexuality. Rather than become embroiled in a debate over, say, whether sexuality is repressed in our society, Foucault is able to see how power uses truth and truth uses power to constitute a subject of sexuality. And this then requires a body with a specific capability in relation to power. The body of modern subjects therefore must have the capacity to conduct, or transfer power in various manifestations. For it seems to

me that not only the subject but the body itself is being redefined, such that the body is not a substance, not a thing, not a set of drives, not a cauldron of resistance impulse, but precisely the site of transfer for power itself. Power happens to this body, but this body is also the occasion in which something unpredictable happens to power; it is one site of its redirection, profusion and transvaluation. (Butler, 2001: 11)

My understanding of this is that the bodies of modern subjects have a sort of enzymatic capacity for power. That is, they can take up various but not all forms of power and they transform, through their interactions with that power, both the power and the body. Using this enzymatic metaphor helps us to understand that the activation of the materiality of institutions and bodies is key to strategies of power.

If truth and power are carrying one another and the body is transferring the strategy of power through it, then power acts on our bodies through the foundation of ourselves as subjects of power, ethics and truth.

Power acts upon the body, very specifically, in the very formulation of bodily passion in its self-persistence and knowability, the very modes by which we seize upon or release a fundamental sense of identity. (Butler, 2001: 19)

Ethics and truth in Foucault's subject, as founded in the analytic of finitude, condition the possibilities of enzymatic reactions possible within any one individual subject.

### *Foucault's Subject is not one of Prescriptive Measures*

Given the philosophy of the subject that I have outlined above, it would be absurd for Foucault to then begin to set out normative ideals and alternative prescriptions to instances of domination. This would be reasonable for a philosophy based on a subject constituted in what can be described as logical norms. But Foucault's philosophy of the subject derives from his studious avoidance of normative debates of logical sense of truth claims. In doing so, he has given us a diagnosis of that which makes possible the domination of modern subjects. Were he not to address himself to the subject he has described, but focus on some normative debate or logical norm, he would not be addressing the possibility for domination. Foucault requires a means by which to separate

knowledge/power in its pervasiveness. Foucault then must point to a freedom that can follow the lines of the three axis of modern subjectivities, which he has analyzed.

### *The Autonomy and Attitude of Modern Subjects*

For Foucault a certain economy of power, ethics and truth always constitute modern subjects. He suggests changes in these axis in order to enhance human capacities without concomitant increases in power. "How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?" (Foucault, 1997: 317). This, apparently, would require that we adjudicate between arrangements of these axis and power. However, as I argued above, Foucault does not have the means at his disposal to adjudicate between forms of power that involve domination and those that do not, or between better and worse forms of domination or power. Foucault does have, however, the means at his disposal to respect human autonomy while conjuring a subject that has capacities necessary to an experience of freedom. I argue that the philosophy of the subject I have described from *The Order of Things*, can be found in a much later work by Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in which he sets out to characterize the autonomy of modern subjects, an attitude of modernity and to look for possibilities, within this attitude, for experiences of freedom.

In "What is Enlightenment?" (1993) Foucault describes modernity as involving a "self-critical attitude towards our present forms of social being" (Patton, 1998: 70). In his description of this attitude we can see the ceaseless referral of the analytic of finitude.

Modern subjects come up against their limitations, and subject these limitations to a critical examination of their conditions and in doing so become aware of what is made impossible by these limitations. Foucault is explicit in stating that such critical engagement with ourselves requires interrogation of three axis: knowledge, ethics and power (Foucault, 1997: 318). Criticism along these lines is done at the limits of our selves, the conditions of our possibility. In this work individuals examine the modes and techniques, the manner by which they are subjects of modernity. The work is done to the ends of human autonomy. Modern subjects apply themselves to their present to the ends of "modifying the pre-existing relation linking, will, authority, and the use of reason (Foucault, 1997: 305). And in this way, modern subjects might recognize the

modes, techniques and manner in which they are governed in what they are, do, think and desire.

And, as with the ceaseless referral of the analytic of finitude, this process brings us to the impossible. Modern subjects recognize in that which they are currently that which is contingent and “the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault, 1997: 315-316). Therefore, this is the work of criticism, “the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault, 1997: 316) and “the handbook of reason” (Foucault, 1997: 308). The work is the work of enlightenment and is done to the ends of human autonomy and freedom.

I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. (Foucault, 1997: 316)

In recognizing themselves within the historico-practical limits of their possibility, modern subjects display a “will to ‘heroize’ the present” (Foucault, 1997: 310). This is a conscious grasping of the epic<sup>5</sup> in the form of the present moment. Modern subjects, in their autonomy might grasp the contingency of their present.

The high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. (Foucault 1997: 311)

Therefore, and significantly, we see that the attitude of modernity, made possible by the axis of truth, ethic and power, is one not only of recognition but also one of distinction. Foucault’s subject cuts a distinguishing figure. Both the recognition and the distinction of our present bring consciousness that things might be otherwise.

Clearly, however, Foucault cannot count on this consciousness that things might be otherwise to guarantee that things will be otherwise. The majority of his work points to domination of subjects constituted in this fashion. Foucault therefore needs to find a process for these axis of truth,

ethics and power and capacities of autonomy and distinction by which and within which human subject may become free from domination.

*Returning to Aesthetics*

Aesthetics is the logical place for Foucault to look for freedom for a subject constituted as the one he has analysed, in part because aesthetics are a logical place to look for freedom for a subject of knowledge. In moments of aesthetic experience there are moments very similar to those moments of problematization. Therefore, aesthetic experiences are processes that are suitable to transform a subject of knowledge. Problematization has three intertwining moments. These are “stepping back from, reflecting upon, and thematizing difficult[ies] in the games of truth” (Schwartz, 1998: 21). This will to distinction, the will to therioize the present that we saw above, is similar again to the moment of practical tension in problematization. The aestheticization of modern life therefore feeds back into itself and makes problematizations possible. This would indicate then that simply in the ceaseless referral of finitude to itself modern subjects experience aesthetic moments. This is not quite accurate however and the difference relates to what I mentioned in the previous paragraph that Foucault must find a process whereby truth can be separated from power.

For the aesthetic to provide moments when truth can be separated from power, this sensitivity to distinction and difference in form must be cultivated. A capacity to distinguish forms is central to aesthetic experience. For example, one must have silence for there to be music. “A genuinely aestheticized culture would be sensitive to differences and exclusions – not only in relation to the forms of art and design, but equally in daily life and in facing social ways of life” (Welsch, 1996: 18). And so it is precisely this aspect of the aesthetic character of modern subjects that will disturb the smooth operation of the norms and normalizing practices to which subjects refer in the ceaseless referral of the analytic of finitude. For Foucault, then, the development of the aesthetic will allow modern subjects to cultivate sensitivity to difference in principle.

Moments of aesthetics experience are experiences of a particular order, they are cultivated sensitivity yet are enabled by the axis and capacities of modern subjects as Foucault sees them. In moments of aesthetic experience the axis of modern subjects come together in such a

way that have a sensual experience of freedom. This is what makes aesthetics the most effective place for Foucault to turn for a solution to the pervasiveness of power/knowledge. Moments of aesthetics experience are moments when the body of modern subjects is not a transfer point of power.

This appeal to sense is logical insofar as Foucault has argued for a subject whose body is a transfer point of power. Any appeal for practices of freedom Foucault makes must, necessarily, have a sensual aspect, because the body of modern subjects has the capacity to act as a transfer point of power. Aesthetics then, for Foucault, is a chance to see truth, to work up to truths, for ourselves as modern subjects, that are untied from power. It is an opportunity to experience the possibilities for truths, which do not provide legitimation to power and domination as it crosses our bodies.

### *To Conclude: A Note on Pleasure*

Traditionally, in aesthetics, moments of aesthetic experience, this experience of freedom is marked by pleasure. This is not to say that every pleasurable experience is an experience of freedom. The freeing transformation of the aesthetic does not just occur to us as we go about our lives as modern subjects. I made this clear in the previous paragraph. The aesthetic moment is one that must be cultivated. It is a moment that is arrived at through attention to the aesthetic. And this is why Foucault draws aesthetics to our attention. In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault is arguing that we have the capacities with which to cultivate our freedom. Significantly, given Foucault's philosophy of the subject, the cultivation of freedom is necessarily experienced as pleasurable.

### *Notes*

1. I acknowledge the huge debate in the literature concerning this issue and the work that has been done to sort out, in Foucault's work, questions of subject, subjectivity, and capacities. However, this paper does not stem from an engagement with those debates, but rather, a close reading of The Order of Things.
2. Although Foucault makes much of his efforts to avoid appeals to common sense and to bracket off the sense individuals make of their social situation, he appeals, in his aesthetics of existence, to a sensual experience to bring human subjects to an experience of freedom. This may appear at first sight to be

paradoxical or even irreconcilable. I, however, argue that it is not because of his philosophy of the subject.

3. Throughout the text of The Order of Things Foucault discusses the emergence of Man, as the object of human sciences. I have kept this language myself to refer to the object of human sciences, as it was. However, when discussing Foucault's philosophy of the subject that derives from his study of the human sciences and their object, I've changed the language. This is for two reasons. The first, of course, is to try to account for the fact that it was not only men that emerged with Man, but women also. The second is that later in the paper I will want to refer to modern subjects more generally and I want to avoid confusion. I argue that I am justified in such a move by arguing that the mode of self-consciousness particular to knowledge is of subjects with subjectivities, and that this is indeed, the particular mode Foucault was studying in The Order of Things.

4. The debates around structuralism and whether or what kind of structuralism Foucault employs is beyond the scope of this paper. My point here is that Foucault analyses discursive formations as self-supporting and self-regulating.

5. I conceive of this heroization or presentation of the epic of the present by thinking of it as a valorization of the significance of all that the present is, given all that it might have been.

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## Errata

### *Vol. 18, 2002*

Terry M. Provost and Terry Marie Provost should read Terry Provost.

Provost Notes:

Note 9: See "The Abolitionist," <http://afgen.com/slave1.html> and "Biographical Sketches," <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/malesupp/bio.htm>

Note 10: On the invitation was a pair of breasts, vivisected and printed beside the title "I Love Titty": A Celebration of the Female Breasts as Lifeforce and Sexual Focus. Tony Bardarch's archives.

Note 11: On his website, "On Cultural Appropriation," Ron Stacey claimed that: "Artists in their works mustn't concern themselves with boundaries of convention, racism, sexism, religion, chauvinism etc., except perhaps to expose the human vagaries involved therein. To do so is to be not an artists, but a propagandist." This passage reads as the depoliticisation of an artist's responsibility to work through complex issues. See his full essay at <http://www.aabc.com/lotos/forum/approp.htm>.

Provost References:

Edmondson, Locksley. "Trans-Atlantic Slavery and the Internationalization of Race." *CQ/Caribbean Quarterly* 22.1 (March 1976) 5-25.

P91 – Last paragraph: a comma should be placed between "Blacks" and "diffused".

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